

LiEat

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忘却色の歌姫

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(みわしいば)

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**LiEat: The Lie-Eating Dragon
and the Forgotten-Color Songstress**
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The Lie-Eating Dragon and the Lie-Breathing Man

It's not a lie. What's happening right now... is no lie.

Struggling to keep my rapid pulse in check, I opened my eyes one more time.

I saw before me a little baby girl. With smooth blonde hair, and eyes that were a strange mix of blue and pink. For a while now, she'd been gawking at her surroundings. Well, but I guess that would only be the natural reaction to being in a totally unfamiliar place all of a sudden...

"Owie!"

When I threw the bath towel at her - maybe a bit too roughly - she yelped like she was going to go flying. With her still in the nude, even I couldn't bear to look. The girl restlessly peeked out from within the towel and stared at me. I averted my eyes and began to process the situation.

My name is Teobaldo Leonhearts. A human.

I do the kind of work that makes the world call me a "con artist." As such, I hardly ever use that name.

There's also a reason I introduce myself as a human. Besides just humans, there also exist in our world strange creatures called "dragons."

It was a long, long time ago when all these different species - beast-people, fairies, you name it - came to be unified and all called "humans." But even now, dragons are considered entirely separate - and there's a reason for that, of course.

Dragons all have their own unique, mysterious powers, and

there's all sorts of speculation about them; that they can grant people's wishes, or that they're weapons developed by some country or another.

There are still plenty of mysteries about why they're born, or even their biology, so information related to dragons sells for big bucks. I make a living gathering all kinds of info to sell to informants, and even so, I found it to be some pretty enticing stuff.

Now, let's rewind back to a few days ago.

Out of the blue, a mystery object shaped like an egg appeared underneath my bed. I didn't know why it appeared when it did, and why under my bed of all places, but talking with informants told me chances were pretty likely it was a dragon egg.

Once I knew that, well, I was a tiny bit elated. Imagine how much I could make off of the info I'd be getting. It was a golden egg, almost literally. To make sure nobody found out about the egg, I decided to refrain from going out for a long while, take utmost care of it, and wait for it to hatch...

But I hadn't even dreamed the egg would hatch *this* quickly. Into a girl, too. I mean, I did *know* dragons had human-like forms, but actually witnessing the scene of a person hatching from an egg was unspeakably creepy.

More importantly, I was still excited about this golden opportunity and all that, and neglected to get much good info on "the moment a dragon egg hatches." That's what I was regretting most at the moment.

"Papa!", the girl said at me.

"Nope."

I immediately denied it. It's not like I laid your egg. It just

appeared on its own. So it doesn't make any sense to call me that. And why "papa," anyway?

"Papaaa!"

...Was she listening to me? Or maybe she can't understand words? But no, come to think of it, she was responding to me with words that I could understand, even when I threw the towel at her earlier.

I'd heard that dragons differed from humans in the way their bodies and minds develop compared to their actual age. To be able to understand language so quickly after birth, and be at least smart enough to converse... I was grateful for that.

"You. What power do you have, dragon?"

"You...? Who's that? Me? Am I "You"?", she responded with a tilted head.

Ahh, I see. Of course she wouldn't come with a name right at birth.

"Uh... All right. Efina. You're Efina. Or Efi, if that's too long."

I tried saying the name of a character from a book I'd just been reading. Properly thinking of a name would be troublesome, and a waste of time. I mean, if she didn't like it, she could just change it, so I saw no problem with giving one at random.

"Efi... Efina... I'm Efina!"

Repeating her name to herself, she looked happy and bounded up. In so doing, the towel around her flew away, and my head made a sharp turn.

And that was how my bizarre life with a dragon began.

Prologue

Once upon a time, in a certain place, there lived a bluebird.

The bluebird was said to grant wishes, and granted the wishes of many people who lived there.

One day, an evil person made a wish to the bluebird.

The bluebird granted even their wish, and as a result, many people were made sad.

The bluebird did not know right from wrong.

They simply went on granting people's wishes.

Before long, all the people vanished, and the bluebird was left all alone.

And everyone lived happily ever after.

“...How many times have I read this?”

“Oh, no. It’s nothing. I was just curious.”

“Yes, it is quite worn. Perhaps I’ve read it many times.”

“What if the bluebird really existed, you say...?”

“Hmm... Well, I do have a wish, yes.”

“But I can’t tell you, because it’s too embarrassing what it is.”

“Ahaha, sorry. Don’t be mad. I’ll tell you another time.”

“So, we’ll play again tomorrow... It’s a promise.”

**The Lie-Eating Dragon
and the Forgotten-Color Songstress
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[Day One]

“Hey papa, what’s that?”, Efi asked, tugging on my sleeve. I ignored her and stared out the window.

Even though we were riding a train, I had to say it was moving along pretty slow. Heck, the horse-drawn carriage that ran past the train earlier was faster. The only thing this hunk of junk excelled at was shakiness.

“Papa, what’s thaaat!”

“Ugh, shaddup, runt. And don’t call me papa.”

I got so irritated as to use some pretty harsh language at Efi. Didn’t sound like something I’d usually say. But consider what it’s like for a guy like me to get stuck raising a little kid.

“I’m not “runt”! I’m Efi!”

...I got forced into having exchanges like these every day, every hour.

The idea that kids are cute has got to be a fantasy dreamt up by people who’ve never had to be with a kid all the time. Can’t see “cute” in them - “odious” is the right word.

I let out a deep sigh, as if expelling my feelings of having no escape.

“So, what’s that? The long thingy, going all whoosh around your neck!”

Efi’s eyes sparkled with intrigue as she pointed toward my neck. How long was this quizzing gonna go on?

“...This is a scarf. You wear it when you’re cold, or when you wanna look fancy.”

“Fancy! Efi wants to be fancy!”

Just as I finished my reply, Efi grabbed the scarf and tugged,

hard. Acting too quickly for me to react, she strangled me, and I let out a groan.

I felt ready to die from the stress of conversing alone, and now you're getting me physically, too? I'm not long for this world, am I...

"Aaaaagggh! Stop it, you stupid brat! Just sit still!"

Tearing away her hand (which was trying to strangle me further), I unwrapped my scarf and put it around Efi.

...It served no function for either warmth or fashion; instead, she was all but tied up by it. But...

"Ehehe! Now Efi is fancy!"

...As long as she was pleased with it, I guess it didn't matter.

Looking at Efi so satisfied with herself, a wave of fatigue came over me.

Work hadn't even started, so why was I feeling dizzy here of all places? I couldn't help but worry for what lay ahead.

It had been about a month since my shocking encounter with Efi.

Since then, I'd asked Efi direct questions and looked into as much as I could, but all I really found out was that Efi was a dragon who fed on lies. Not even she seemed to know the reason or experience of her birth.

I was delighted at first to have my hands on a dragon, since everybody sought after them. But with the pain and fatigue just piling on day after day, I was already beginning to regret it.

I should've sold her to somebody for a ton of money while she was still in the egg - thoughts like that grew bigger with each passing day.

“Papa, why are you tired?”

‘Cause of you, I refrained from saying. Well, or maybe I just didn’t have the energy left to voice it. Instead, a little groan escaped my mouth.

Maybe I should take a nap here, I thought. Then I felt the cellphone in my pocket vibrate. Before the vibration even paused, I answered and muttered “Who?”

“Oh, oh? Why so exhausted? You okay over there?”

“...Informant with the hat?”

The call came from a woman who mainly worked as an informant, buying and selling info. Her always wearing a hat is what stood out to me most, so I called her “the informant with the hat.”

...’Course, I couldn’t see that gaudy hat of hers over the phone now.

“Hmm, sounds like you’re still on the train? You’re taking this reeeal slow, huh. The day might just change on yooou.”

“...Hopefully not.”

This informant was skilled, but had some childish aspects. I was never very good at talking with her, but I felt she was vastly preferable to Efi.

Oh yeah, Efi - I turned to her, and found her sound asleep, the scarf still wrapped around her whole body.

“How boring. Feels like there’s not much point in teasing you these days, y’know? By the way, what alias are you using now? Claude? Duke?”

“Those are some pretty outdated ones... For now, it’s Al.”

Thanks to Efi having fallen asleep for me, I was getting back to my conning self. I had to get things straightened out before I reached our destination, or it could lead to a blunder. The smallest

mistake could ruin the time, effort, and money involved in coming here - so, had to avoid that at all costs.

“Okay, Al it is. So, I’ll put together the info for you while I’ve got the chance.”

With that, she began to explain.

On a request from the informant with the hat, I was headed toward a place called Indigo Town to determine the truth of a certain piece of info.

The info in question was the legend of the bluebird. Word was that this thing could grant people’s wishes.

“And I’d like you to capture it, if you could... Well?”

“Can’t tell you if I can or not until we know if it actually exists.”

The informant cackled at that over the phone.

“You’re talking about *my* info, you know? Granted, I’m not sure what conditions will get it to appear, but asking people around town might be the fastest way to find out.”

“Right, got it.”

The instant our conversation came to an end, the announcement that we had arrived at Indigo Town echoed through the train. I said farewell and hung up, and shook Efi’s shoulder as she slept like the dead.

“I’m already fuuull...”, she mumbled, drooling with a satisfied expression. So I awarded her a solid poke in the forehead.

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“It hurts...” Clutching to my sleeve, Efi rubbed her forehead with the other hand.

I didn’t think I’d prodded her that powerfully, but I grew

worried as she kept acting like this. Maybe I had poked a little too hard.

“It huuurts...?” She shot a glance over at me.

...Ahh, got it. She just wanted me to pay attention to her. Toward the beginning, I wouldn’t notice her intentions and got ordered around quite a bit, but after being with her a month, yeah, I could tell.

“Listen, I told you a million times already on the train, but don’t walk ahead of me.”

“Ah, wait, wait! Don’t walk fast! Nooo!”

I had no time to bother with her. First, I had to find a place to lodge here. The train arrived late, so I was in sort of a hurry.

“Oh yeah, do... trains? Do you use money for them?” Realizing her earlier tactic wasn’t getting her any attention, she talked to me as she usually did.

“Obviously. If you think anything’s gonna be easy, that means it costs money.”

“But you said you didn’t have money earlier, Al.”

Why’d she have to remember that?

“...Listen, Efi. Not having money isn’t something you can solve right away.”

She nodded eagerly beside me.

“But anything else, and usually you can do something about it.”

“So...?”

From my pants pocket, I produced a counterfeit ticket I’d created last night.

“So what you don’t have, you make.”

We walked for a while, but Indigo Town was a big place with a fair number of inhabitants. Plus, with the exception of some residents I occasionally spotted in the darkness, they had a pretty bustling lifestyle. ...Some things caught my attention, but I had to prioritize finding lodging for now.

At a large plaza with a fountain in it, I decided to try talking with a towns person resting on a bench to the side. While I'd taken the scarf back from Efi after getting off the train, I pulled it away from my mouth and got my expression and voice in order.

"Good day. There are a few things I'd like to ask you... Is now a good time?"

He slowly raised his head to look at me. A middle-aged man whose thick beard stood out to me. No sooner had he seen me than his face brightened and he stood up.

"Oh, ohh! Could you be a traveler? Well, what do you think of the town?!"

"Ah, it has a very nice air about it. All the inhabitants seem quite joyful, too."

"No doubt! Being here makes you happy. It's the town of happiness, that's what it's called! Hope you can bring home a lot of happiness yourself, lad!"

With a hearty laugh, he put his arm around my shoulder and shook me. It was stronger than I expected, and my body creaked a little. I glared at Efi, who was about to speak up, silently instructing her not to so much as burp.

Then I faced the man again with a smile.

"By the way, is there anywhere I could lodge in this town? I've nowhere to stay right now, you see..."

The middle-aged man gently removed his arm from me, and

brought it back around his head. His expression hardened slightly.

“Hmm... Well, let’s see. As far as I know, most of the inns are all filled up or closed, so there’s just... Ah!”

Having a sudden revelation, the man clapped his hands together in front of his chest.

“That’s right, there’s a large mansion at the back of town, where a pretty little girl lives, known as the Songstress. How about you head to see her?!”

“So this is... a person’s house, you mean?”

“Yeah, but she’s such a gentle soul. Don’t you worry, she’ll gladly accept you!”

There wasn’t necessarily a particular problem with using a person’s house, but for the business of a con artist, a proper inn is just more convenient, with its variable population and all. But if he said there were no inns available, guess there was no choice.

“...Understood. I believe I’ll go inquire there. The back of town, you say?”

“Yep. Just head straight down the road from this plaza and you’ll find the mansion. In fact, around this time should be when the Songstress is singing. If you get lost, you should follow her voice!”

I said my thanks to the man and left.

After walking a few minutes, Efi tugged on my sleeve and asked, “Hey papa, why is it when you talk to people different from me, you’re a different papa?”

“Not papa, I’m Al now. Don’t ever call me papa. Got it?”

“See, your voice is all different too! And your face! Why?” Efi kept tugging.

She’d really stretch that sleeve at this rate. Appearances are

the number one thing you have to pay attention to when you're tricking people. And anything said by some bozo with a mismatched sleeve would probably lack credibility.

I silently poised my other hand to unleash a forehead-poke, and Efi let out a "gwuh!" and went docile.

With a quiet Efi in tow, I walked out of the plaza, and once I was sure we were on a road without many people, I began to answer her question.

"Listen up. People... When they meet somebody for the first time, first they judge the person by their appearance. Next, their voice and tone. What's inside, well, that comes way at the end."

"But you're all scarfed now, so you're hiding your face..."

"Yeah, can't be bothered to fool people except when it's necessary." I pulled up my scarf a little.

Long ago, the informant with the hat told me my real face - the face I was born with, wasn't a great face for being sociable. Since then, I'd hid my expression a lot except when talking to people. Sure, I was aware I had a bit of a nasty glare, but was it really that frightening?

"Hmm... But that means... It's a lie-Al?", Efi asked with a vexed look.

"Lies aren't lies if they don't get found out.", I bluntly replied, and she tilted her head as if understanding even less.

"But aren't lies bad? You lie to people, so... are you a bad person?"

Pure, to the point. And not even with any ill will.

Kids are so difficult to handle when it comes to this stuff. Especially for someone like me who makes a living deceiving people, that much purity is too much to handle.

“Al... Are you a bad person?”, she asked again, worried.

I scratched the back of my head a few times, then told Efi more or less the first response I could think of.

“Sure, I’m bad. But so are the guys who get tricked.”

After walking straight down the path for a while, a pretty sound came into earshot, like a bird chirping from far away. No... It was a human singing.

“Ooh! Pretty song!”

Efi’s mood was improved, her eyes sparkling and voice elated. Felt like a lie how she’d been all quiet and moping like she didn’t want to take another step earlier.

“Once we reach the mansion, we can hear it up close. So pick up the pace a little.”

“Gotcha!”, Efi shouted, and her pace increased. Or rather, she started off running. Did she already forget all those times I said not to get ahead of me?

For as slow as Efi’s head was, she was fast on her feet. I supposed she couldn’t get lost on a straight path, but there was no guarantee she wouldn’t run into something. I groaned and hurried after her.

Turned out I had no reason to worry; by the time I spotted Efi, I’d reached the great white door of the mansion without any real incidents along the way. As for Efi, she was talking with an unfamiliar young man in front of the door.

He had blue hair and wore a black silk hat tilted to one side, decorated with a yellow ribbon. On the side opposite the hat stuck out a perky, dog-like ear, and it twitched about every time Efi said something. Must have had some beast blood in him.

Actually, I recalled how compared to other towns, this place seemed to have a lot of people with animal-like ears and tails.

“Oh! That’s him! He’s my... um, Al!”

Efi pointed to me and began to explain me to the young man. I was focused on catching my breath after all that running, but when the man looked at me, I hurried to reassemble my expression and stuck my face out from the scarf.

“Good day... I’m sorry my sister’s come and bothered you. She didn’t pull any pranks, did she?”

He smiled nicely. “Ah, you’re her older brother? I was afraid she might be lost, so I’m glad you weren’t far. Do you have some business at this mansion?”, he asked in a kind voice.

“Oh, I should introduce myself. I’m Al, and the little girl there is Efina. We’re on a journey, but we’re at a bit of a loss looking for a place to stay in town. A friendly townspeople told us we might be able to inquire here...”

“Indeed, I see now. Yes, Mischa will certainly welcome you. As for myself... I am Phil, Mischa’s humble butler.” The young man, Phil, politely bowed.

I bowed in return, lifted my head, and put my hand on the door handle. The old, grave doors slowly opened with a slight creak.

The moment the doors opened, a clear singing voice washed over me like a giant wave I’d only been feeling the ripples of.

It was a large hall, and right in the center, a girl with an air of transience about her was singing. Slightly further away from the girl, what must have been townspeople gathered in many rings around her, all intently focused on her song.

It seemed we arrived right toward the end of the song, and

when the girl finished the final note, the hall was completely silent for a few seconds. Then immediately after, a storm of cheers and praise erupted from the audience, echoing through the hall. Seeming scared by the loud noise, Efi ducked behind me.

The girl went around thanking the people encircling her one by one, but then finally noticing some unfamiliar guests, she approached us.

With each step the girl took, the soles of her shoes clacked against the hard marble floor and made a rhythmical sound. Just as the sound came to a stop, her mouth opened.

She gently tilted her head and put her hand to her chest. "It's nice to meet you. I am Mischa. Do you have some business here?"

In that moment, the slight flopping of the rabbit-esque ears on her head and the sway of her long hair stood out in my mind.

"You're a super good singer, miss!", Efi leapt out to say before I could even open my mouth.

I just can't contain that boundless curiosity, can I... I held my head.

Turning back to the songstress, Mischa, she didn't actually seem especially displeased. She bent her knees a little to get on eye level with Efi.

"Heehee, thank you. I love to sing, so it makes me very happy to hear that." She smiled a mild smile. Efi smiled back, and a peaceful mood filled the air.

...Not good. These two are gonna bring me down to their level. I loudly cleared my throat, getting Mischa's attention.

"Excuse me? We intend to stay in this town for a little while, and we're looking for a place to stay. If it's not a bother, would you let us stay here? We can handle food and clothing ourselves..."

“Oh my! In that case, you should absolutely stay with us. We can provide meals or anything you might lack, and we won’t charge at all. We have plenty of rooms... Oh, yes, Phil. Go find an open room upstairs, please!”

Mischa made a request of Phil, standing a ways behind us. With an “Understood,” Phil came up as if sliding on over.

“I will show you to your room. This way, please.” Phil swung a hand out in front and began to walk.

I told Efi “Let’s go,” but she wouldn’t move an inch from Mischa’s side, so I grabbed her by the collar and dragged her along.

Efi sulked, and waved back toward Mischa.

Going upstairs and down a long hallway, Phil, walking a few steps ahead of us, came to a sudden stop.

He produced a small cluster of keys from his pocket and put one of them into the door’s keyhole. Right as it clicked open, he began to speak.

“Please make use of this room. The mansion is quite large, and first-time visitors are often lost... But I believe this room should pose little issue, being near a hallway which leads to the stairs.”

Phil quietly opened the door and invited us to go in.

It was a spacious room with two beds and refreshing light pouring in through a big window. Looked fancier than some hotels.

Maybe this was pretty lucky after all, considering they were letting us stay here for free.

“Wow, the bed’s so fluffyyy!”

While I was busy thinking about that, Efi dove onto a bed and hopped on it like mad.

Shoot, I got careless and let go of her... I apologized to Phil,

who was snickering, and went to seize her.

“Oh, no, it’s good to be so full of energy.”

While I fought to calm down Efi squirming about in my arm, Phil asked a question in a suddenly serious tone.

“...By the way, for about how long to you plan to stay here?”

It was a normal, obvious question for someone lending out a room - but the air about Phil seemed a little different, I felt.

...Was there something to this?

“Oh, let’s see... There are a few matters we want to look into in this town. I would like if we could stay here for three days, at least. Would that be a problem?”

For an instant, Phil’s expression seemed to stiffen at the words “three days.”

...So there *is* something.

Observing Phil’s countenance, I waited for his next move.

“...No, that’s not a problem. Simply, it’s just that there are many inhabitants in this mansion, coming near-daily to listen to Mischa sing or just to visit. It is typically busiest in the noontime...” He paused. “Is that all right with you?”, he asked with a somewhat uneasy look.

He seemed to be desperately trying to conceal his thoughts, but his expression just grew stiffer. I supposed everything he’d just said was his answer for the public.

I put on a cheery look in contrast. “No, no! Not to worry. As you can see, my sister’s rather noisy herself, so I’m quite used to it.”

With that, Phil’s shoulders loosened and he smiled. As for Efi, who I’d offered up as an example, she was still thrashing her arms and legs about in my grip.

“...Alright, let’s make it simple. You’re Efi, my little sister. That’s all the info you need to remember. Don’t talk any more than you need to. Got it?”

Once Phil had left the room, I gave Efi a reminder to keep her from causing any blunders. I’d tried having her use an alias, but she kept forgetting and calling herself Efi no matter what, so it didn’t pan out.

“Mmm... I can’t talk about anything?” Her brow wrinkled, and she tilted her head.

“Like the past, for instance. Where you’ve traveled, what you’ve seen - if you get asked anything like that, don’t say a word. People who suck at lying talk about things they weren’t even asked. And don’t even notice the inconsistencies in their stories.”

Efi seemed awfully confused by that explanation, and her head spun around.

“So what should I do if I get asked?”

“Simple. You can just answer, “I’m a dummy, so I don’t know!””

“What’s a dummy?”

...Was she really that big of a dummy? Well, maybe convenient for me.

“It means you’ve got a lousy brain.”

“Hmm. Is having a lousy brain bad?”

“Means you’re gonna have a lot of troubles ahead, that’s for sure.”

Boy. I just can’t handle kids at all. Especially when they’re pure and straightforward... and keep innocently bum-rushing me with an empty head, like this runt.

“Hmmm...”

And even after I'd explained it this much, she still didn't seem to understand. Seemed like continuing with this any longer would just be a waste of time.

"...It's not really that bad of a thing. So you don't have to worry about it."

"Got it!"

Wonder if she really understood? ...That'd probably do, at any rate. Until Efi knew what "dummy" meant, I could go with that. I didn't really mind.

"Alright... There's still time until the sun goes down, so I'll check out the town some more. If I'm gonna look for the bluebird, I should know where things are first."

"Me too!" Efi leapt over as I stood up from the bed to go out. It was pretty forceful, so I nearly toppled over. Managing to regain balance, I tore Efi away from my waist.

"Thought you were saying you didn't wanna walk anymore earlier? This town is huge, so forget it. Stay here."

I threw her toward the bed, and she booed me from atop it.

"I'll buy you something sweet on the way back."

"Efi will hold down the fort!", she replied with gleaming eyes.

I gave her a sidelong glance, left the room, and went back outside the mansion.

A few hours had passed since we arrived in town, but the bustle outside showed no sign of dying down. I headed for the fountain plaza and found the middle-aged man who told me about the mansion, taking a break on the same bench as before.

Noticing me, he heaved himself up. "Oh, traveler! Well, did you find a place to stay?"

“Yes, we had no problems. We went to the mansion as you said, and Miss Mischa warmly accepted when we asked to stay. You were a great help.”

“I see, I see.” The man smiled and slapped my back a few times.

From what I could tell, there were a lot of good-natured inhabitants here, even besides this guy. With people like that, you wouldn’t get any funny business - easy to handle in general.

The man checked his watch. “Oh, would you look at the time! I’d better get home, or the wife’ll get real annoying... Oh, don’t tell anybody I said that. A happy day to you!” With a quick goodbye, he left in a hurry.

I turned around to resume my rounds. When I did, I noticed a circle of old ladies in the shade of trees whispering to each other about something.

I passed by, feigning ignorance, and listened in. Their conversation caught my interest. “Is it all right to let them stay at that mansion?” “Shouldn’t they stay away?”

Were they talking about me? Even after I’d passed them by, I felt their eyes on me, so I supposed it was so.

Ever since coming here, I’d felt something wasn’t right. I couldn’t pinpoint it, but it gave me a bad feeling.

Still, the conversation didn’t seem directly connected to my search for the bluebird. It was probably safe to just forget about it.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts, and refocused on the bluebird.

Watching the sunset turn the sky a dark purple, I rewrapped my scarf.

“...Hope this can go without incident.”

The words unconsciously slipped out, and I was taken aback with myself. Didn't saying things like that just make bad things happen? ...But it was too late.

I decided to head back for the day.

Right around then, I remembered I'd promised to buy her something sweet. My feet feeling a little heavy, I went to go pick something out.

Back at the mansion, I opened the front door and found Mischa singing in the hall again. But unlike before, there wasn't a huge gallery; the only person listening was Efi.

"Oh, welcome back! You must be tired."

Mischa noticed me first and gave me a soft smile. Nobody had shown me any concern for my fatigue and suffering lately - and I'd been going through nothing but, so I really needed that.

"Huh? Al, you're back! Sweets, please!"

...And she was the main reason why.

Wanting to keep that from showing to Mischa, I prepared my face, removed my scarf, and took out a package of cookies I'd bought at a nearby store. Efi's eyes shone at once, and she tried to rip it from my hands, but I firmly held onto the edge of the package.

When Efi ate sweets, it was like she removed some kind of limiter, and sometimes she'd spit fire. It seemed there were some dragons who could manipulate forces of nature beyond their usual abilities, so I wondered if Efi was one of them. I'd had to throw out a change of clothes in the past thanks to it.

"...You can't eat it here. You'll have to come back to the room to eat."

My normal self nearly came out in front of Efi, but I was

cautious to keep on the mask of a kind older brother in front of Mischa.

“Whaaa?! But I wanna eat with the singer lady!” Efi refused and pulled on the package.

Typically she would complain, but comply - why was she resisting now of all times? I guess I really didn’t get how to handle her yet.

“Heehee, don’t concern yourself with me. You do need to get back to your room soon. Please enjoy them for yourself, little sweet-lover Efi!”

Mischa spoke with a charming smile, then bowed and went up the stairs.

...How unexpected.

I didn’t think our war over the cookie bag had been very well-acted. Yet she didn’t show any particular doubts - in fact, maybe she could even see us as a friendly brother and sister.

“Heyyy! Let’s eat cookies!”

Efi’s words brought me back, and hit me with fatigue. Augh... How long should I keep this life up?

Should I consult with someone else of her species? The dragons I knew were enough to count on one hand... My feelings started to get messy thinking about it, so I put a stop to that.

Let’s just sleep for today. Yeah, that’s a good idea.

Not lending an ear to Efi’s whining, I quickly headed up the stairs to our room. She went “Ah!” and went after me, sticking behind me thereafter.

Once we got back to the room, I took off my coat and immediately fell onto the bed. It was rare that I’d ever gotten *this*

tired.

I often dealt with a lot of peculiar people in this line of work, and I was proud to say I was accustomed to handling them. But the girl here was a dragon. And a kid. I didn't understand one iota of her thought process.

As I felt like I was going to be crushed by fatigue, Efi looked at me worriedly. I turned my gaze to look at her face.

Looking at her again, I thought, she didn't look much different from a human at all. I wondered if there was a reason why dragons imitated humans in appearance.

Efi had been pondering something as she watched me. I wonder. Maybe she was concerned for me? Then I wish she'd leave me alone.

I had no energy to voice that sentiment and just stared. Then Efi, seeming to have an idea, put on a victorious smile and asked cheerfully...

"Can we sleep together?"

"...Gimme a break," I bluntly refused.

[Day Two]

The chirping of birds tickled my ears and brought me back to consciousness.

I was worried that some of yesterday's exhaustion would still hang over me, but I sat up and found that I'd made a full recovery.

I'm proud to say I haven't lived a decent life from the day I was born to the present, but it seemed that when it came to my ability to recover, life wasn't so unfair. Youth is wonderful. I opened the window and relished that as I felt the breeze.

While I was revering the refreshing morning, Efi got up with a yawn. My early-morning repose ended here.

"...You're up early today."

With not a hint of refreshedness in my face nor voice, I said my first words to Efi for the day. She rubbed her eyelids and drawled "Mornin'..." I impulsively replied "Morning" back.

"Where're we going today?", Efi asked in a still-sleepy tone.

"Let's see... I'll investigate in town. You sit tight at the mansion..."

"No!", she refused before I could finish. Felt like she was pretty opposed to my suggestions as of late. Was she at that rebellious age already?

"We gotta stay together!", she pressed further. When I was a kid, I was never this stubborn. Well, though I wasn't a little girl.

Honestly, if we got split up in this huge town and she got lost, what was she going to do? Did she understand that she was a dragon, something tons of people around the world were after for research?

"I'll go buy you something else today."

“Okay!”

...Couldn't even decide if she was easy or hard to handle. Oh well. Relieved it wasn't a lengthy battle, my shoulders loosened.

Come to think of it, I'd heard dragons weren't too satisfied by human food. So why did Efi like sweets so much? And before we came here, I'd fed her quite a lot of lies, so I thought she shouldn't be getting hungry anytime soon.

“Candy would be good!”

“Sure,” I replied, practically not hearing her.

There were still many mysteries about her.

To be extra sure, I asked the butler Phil to keep an eye on Efi, and left her at the mansion while I explored the town.

Today, I would begin my search for the bluebird in earnest.

Now where to start, I pondered... Suddenly, someone behind me forcefully slapped my back.

“Hey, traveler! Fancy seeing you. Guess it's just 'cause I go around the same places every day! Gahaha!”

I turned around to find that same bearded man. For such a big town which had to have a lot of inhabitants, we really did meet often.

Given our previous conversations, it appeared he knew a fair bit about the town, so maybe he knew something about the bluebird.

“Oh, good day! It's true, we keep running into each other. You see, I came here to look into the bluebird. Would you know anything, sir?”, I asked with such a cheerful voice and smile, even I thought I sounded idiotic.

Having such a model example around me lately, it seemed I

could pull off a far more idiotic performance.

“Ohh! The bluebird, I see. Yes, it’s in this town, alright. Though I’ve never seen it. Still, it’s why everyone in this town is so happy, with a few exceptions!”

“A few... exceptions?”

That got my attention at once. Maybe it was related to the feeling niggling at me since I arrived.

“Ah... Well, I shouldn’t say this too loud...”

He leaned over, put a big hand by his mouth, and brought his face near my ear.

“Don’t you think this town’s a little weird? Most of the townspeople are simple and carefree like me, happy people. But I’m sure you’ve spotted some other, more gloomy folks.”

I was reminded of the old ladies talking yesterday. People like that would hardly be rare or anything in other towns, but it’s true, they felt out of place here.

“See, rumor has it that they’re all monsters taking human form. And that someday they’ll reveal themselves, and attack this peaceful town. So travelers like you had better watch out for ‘em, too.”

Right after he finished speaking, the man stretched his back and laughed loudly. I was somewhat confused by the sudden change in mood.

“Well, nothing else to really worry about, anyway. Oh, you said you were looking for the bluebird? Well, I’ve heard that the bluebird shows up once a week.”

“Once a week...?”

Though he said “it’s in this town,” it didn’t seem you could encounter it very frequently. So, wouldn’t it be difficult to

determine its authenticity in short order...? As I began to ponder, I thanked the man and left.

Without knowing when the bluebird had last appeared, I would probably have to stay in this town for at least a week. Maybe I should have brought along a little more money.

Ever since I started living with Efi, my funds always suffered. When I was alone, I was free to decide whether I should skip meals and whatnot, but that wouldn't work out anymore. I felt like an impoverished housewife struggling to do finances.

It was an experience which I would never have conceived of going through before I met Efi.

"I'm getting a headache..."

I put my fingers to my temple and waited for the pain to subside.

Come to think of it, that guy said "this town has inhabitants who are happy and carefree, and gloomy ones who aren't." And how rumor was spreading that the latter were secretly monsters...

After walking a bit, in a main street lined with various stores, I decided to try casually observing the townspeople.

Indeed, the majority seemed like bright-faced people, but there was the occasional person with a strikingly dark expression. And I saw not a single person somewhere in the middle.

On one hand, I couldn't perceive the gloomy people as simply having an especially low standard of living. Nor did it feel like they were stricken with some illness, or they were troublemakers, or that there was a significant wage gap between townspeople. There must have been some other reason for the difference in expressions, but I couldn't tell from looking.

“Maybe it has something to do with the bluebird...?”

The man earlier had told me that thanks to the bluebird, they lived happily.

Given that, were these people who hadn't received the bluebird's blessing? If so, what was the reason?

The more I thought about it, the threads of the mystery seemed to get increasingly complex to untangle. I was working with too little information still.

I checked where the sun was at to determine how much time I had left. Still plenty. It was only my second day of searching, so it was unsurprising that I'd have to fumble about.

Though groaning, I moved ahead.

Although I had to wonder, how big was this bluebird? Searching for a little bird in a town as big as this sounded pretty terrible. Once I found it, I'd be sure to price the info extra-high for the hat informant. Fueling myself with that thought, I resumed walking.

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“Have you lived here a long time, miss?”

The songstress lady thought about my question for a little. Her head slanted, and she answered like she was saying “maybe?”

“Yes, for a long time. I'm very happy to be in this town. So I can't even think of going somewhere else.”

She smiled gently at me. The songstress lady's smile was really lovely. Her singing was lovely, but she was a really lovely person too.

“Where did you come from, Efi?”

Her sudden question kind of startled me.

...Where *did* I come from?

I remembered when I was born. I saw papa... er, Al's eyes get all wide. But after that, we'd been going all sorts of places, like we were now.

"Hmm... Places! Lots of places!"

The lady made a curious face at my answer, but smiled right after.

Al told me not to answer if people asked about my past, so I wonder if that answer was okay? Efi always keeps her promises!

"True, you did say you were travelers. I'd be glad if this town pleased you, too."

Right after the lady said that, the mansion door went *creeeak*.

"Al!"

Al's appeared from behind the door. When he saw my face, he trembled a little for some reason.

"Did you behave?"

"I did!"

Maybe. All I did today was walk all around the mansion, and have mister butler tell me "I was surprised when you vanished all of a sudden," and talked with the songstress lady and a bunch of people who'd all gone home now. That's got to just barely make "behaving"!

"I was behaving!"

"You... don't have to repeat yourself." Al scratched his head.

Al's eyebrows would get all tight, and he'd do this a lot. I wonder what it meant?

I wonder... Maybe he was surprised that I listened to what he told me?

“Eheh!”

Then I guess I should be proud! I puffed out my chest, and I think Al’s eyebrows got even tighter than before.

“Ahh...” I let out a big yawn. I’d walked around the mansion a lot and talked a lot, so maybe I was kind of tired.

“My, perhaps we spoke for a little long. It is getting quite late. Efi was behaving perfectly well, don’t worry. I’m envious you have such an adorable sister!”

“Oh, she’s just always giving me trouble... Hahaha.”

Al replied to the lady with a different face and voice from before. This was a really weird thing about Al. I think maybe they were lies, but I wasn’t able to see through Al’s lies.

“Well, I’ll excuse myself for today. Good night.”

“Good night!”

I waved and saw off the songstress lady, and she waved back.

Once the lady was gone, Al went back to his usual self.

“...Back to the room.”

He pulled my hand with a tired look, so I hurried along, careful not to trip.

Back in the room, first Al took off his coat, then jumped back onto the bed.

I loved jumping on the bed too, because it’s so fluffy and comfy. I got really happy whenever I saw a similarity between me and Al.

“Oh yeah, I didn’t give you this. Here’s a souvenir. Only one ’cause it’s before bed. You get the rest tomorrow.”

“Woo! Thanks!”

Al gave me round candies wrapped in a cute little bag, so I took

one out and put it in my mouth.

Rolling it around on my tongue, I tasted a sweet flavor. Sweet flavors wouldn't do much to make me full, but they'd make me really happy. And when I made a happy face, Al would sometimes smirk a little, which I loved to see.

"...Well, guess we should sum up the day."

"Okay!"

Whenever we came to a town to investigate something and acted separate, we'd always report what happened to each other before saying good night.

Who you talked to, what you found... He told me to tell him everything, so I told him about how I'd walked around the mansion and talked about things with the songstress lady.

"Anything catch your eye while exploring the mansion, or talking to the songstress?"

Wanting to have a good answer, I closed my eyes a little and tried to remember.

The mansion was... big? That probably wasn't strange. And there weren't statues of a weird old guy like the town we went to before.

What I talked to the lady about... She said she liked this town. That probably wasn't strange either, right?

"Err..."

But what I thought was strange and what Al thought was strange were a little different. So like usual, I decided to tell him everything.

Once I was finished, Al nodded a few times. "...I see. Guess we can pretty much say we didn't get much today."

I guess since I'd talked so much, I let out yet another big yawn. I got really tired today...

"Okay, you can sleep now. See you tomorrow."

Al patted my head and quickly crawled under his bed covers.

"Good night, Al!"

"Yeah, good night."

Our final words of the day. He was always super blunt, but if you said good morning, Al would say good morning back, and if you said good night, he'd say good night.

So I figured Al had to be a good person. Nodding to myself, I got under my own covers and closed my eyes.

I hoped tomorrow could be just like this, too.

[Day Three]

Still sleepy... But is it morning already? I opened my eyes, and saw blinding light coming in.

It's morning! I sat up. I wonder if Al's up?

I looked over to Al's bed. He was still lying down on it.

"Morning! It's morning!", I greeted loudly. Sometimes I would jump onto the bed to wake him up, but he'd yell at me a lot, so I couldn't do that again for a while.

Making kind of a pained voice, Al looked toward me.

"...What time is it?"

What time...? Did he want me to check the clock? He taught me how to read a clock one time, but it was too confusing, and I didn't get it.

"Oh, sorry. You still can't read a clock yet..."

Al slowly got up, rubbing his eyes. His hair was all messy.

Stumbling around, he started getting dressed and messing with his hair. I did the same. I could at least dress myself, of course!

"...Your ribbon's crooked."

...I could *mostly* dress myself, of course. I got some help from Al at the end, so now I was all set to tackle another day.

Al told me to hold down the fort again and left the room. He wouldn't take me along yesterday, or before that either. When I really wanted to go with him!

I puffed my cheeks and pouted to myself. In a small town, he'd let me come along, but in a big town like this, he'd always make me watch the room.

He said it was so I didn't get lost, but I never get that lost! ...Probably.

Just sitting around in the room was boring. I wonder if the songstress lady is up? Maybe I should go talk with her again.

After a couple of jumps, the door opened with a click. The handles on these doors were just a little too high up for me...

I pushed the door and entered a long hallway. Yesterday I'd gotten lost here, which led into an adventure. Mansions really are huge! But I'd probably be fine today.

When she was awake, the songstress lady was always in this big plaza-y area downstairs. Mister butler told me yesterday that it was called the "banquet hall."

There was a big round table with chairs packed around it, and the lady would sit there and talk with the town people, or sing songs.

And she looked really happy doing it. All the town people looked really happy, too.

I went downstairs to the banquet hall, but she wasn't there yet. But mister butler was there cleaning instead.

"Ah, Miss Efi. Good morning." He greeted me with a wide smile.

"Good morning!", I shouted back loudly, 'cause I wasn't going to let him beat me. My powerful greeting echoed around the mansion like yelling from the top of a mountain.

"Where's the singer lady?"

"Ah, I believe Mischa is taking a bath. She seemed to be in the mood for that today."

So the songstress lady was in a bath, apparently. Did taking a bath in the morning feel good? I'd only taken baths at night, so I didn't know.

“Then let’s talk, mister!” If the lady wasn’t around, mister butler would be fine too. He looked at the mop in his hands for a few seconds, then sighed.

“I suppose. I’ve mostly finished, so that should be fine.”

Alright! This might’ve been the first time I could really talk to mister butler. He was always going here and there around the mansion. And maybe I could hear some different stuff from him than from the songstress.

“Wait here,” he told me, so I sat in a chair around the round table and waited. After a little while, mister butler came with a plate and a cup.

“Ooh! Sweets!”

There were sweet things I’d never seen before on the plate. They were colorful, and chubby, and really cute!

Seeing my sparkly eyes, he told me about them. “Have you never seen one before? These are called macarons. They sell them at the nearby sweets shop. They’re quite delicious.”

He placed one in my hand. “Here you are.”

I tilted it around. The macaron rolled and danced in my palm.

After that, I gave it a little bite. A fluffy and sweet taste filled my mouth. Very delicious!

“You appear to be quite pleased. That’s good,” the butler said, offering me a cup. The cup was full of tea. I knew tea, ’cause I’d drank it before.

“How much sugar would you like?”

“Lots!”

Mister butler seemed surprised by my answer, and smiled childishly. He put two sugar cubes in my cup and swished them around with a little spoon. Then he sat in the chair next to me.

"Mister butler, have you been friends with miss singer for a long time?", I asked, suddenly wondering about it. He said he was the songstress's butler, but they seemed really friendly to me.

"Yes, that's right. We have been friends for a long time in this town," he answered while pouring his own tea.

"Has she always liked to sing?"

"Yes. She's always sung quite often. And I've adored Mischa's singing for just as long."

He smiled warmly, and the morning light lit up his face. He really seemed to like miss songstress.

And I could tell deep down that he wasn't lying, so I felt warm inside.

When people told the truth, especially when talking about things they liked, it would lighten up my own feelings. I kind of liked that sensation.

Though, if there wasn't anyone who lied, I might go hungry and collapse.

"I heard from Al that when you spend a long time with people, you sometimes fight. Have you ever fought with miss singer?"

"Err..."

Mister butler was about to put the cup to his lips, but my question made him put it back on the plate.

"We... haven't fought, come to think of it. Though reasonably speaking, I suppose that should be the case."

Reasonably speaking? What did he mean? I had kind of a question mark about mister butler's words.

I didn't feel like he was lying. Probably. I couldn't be sure without Al around.

"Good morning!"

While I was thinking, the songstress lady trotted over with a steamy air around her.

“Morning, miss singer!”

Her eyes blinked, and she looked at me.

“Good morning... Er, Efi!” It took a little while before she said my name and smiled kindly.

Just a little pause. But I found that little bit of time a little weird.

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Continuing on from yesterday, I went around town for several hours, but failed to obtain any useful information.

“Does this bluebird really even exist...?”

Sure enough, I started to doubt the thing itself. All the residents I’d asked had the same thing to say.

“Thanks to the bluebird, we’re happy.” Albeit with minor differences in phrasing, they all told me that with a cheery look.

Sure, the bluebird seemed to be a popular legend in this town. But isn’t it a little odd?

Maybe the bluebird was a kind of idol. I couldn’t help but get a kind of religious feeling from this. Some people will blame bad things happening to them not on themselves but on divine punishment, so the opposite wouldn’t be so strange.

“...Well, at least I’m not completely out of leads.”

There was one more option. Something I’d heard from that bearded man yesterday, then avoided.

To talk to the gloomy residents...

From yesterday to now, I’d been choosing to talk with cheery-

looking townspeople. Mostly because that talk of “they might be monsters, so watch your back” was still hanging over me. Always wanted to avoid hassle.

But now I was stuck, and I felt like if I kept avoiding it and keeping up the way I was now, coming to this town at all would end up being a complete waste of time.

So no other option. Of course I’m strong enough to protect myself, at least.

Checking the pouches in my coat and pants for concealed weapons, I went into a cramped alley in search of some downtrodden townspeople.

“Sigh...”

I sat in the shade of a large tree.

I had walked around town a lot. Searched every nook and cranny, from tight alleys to wide-open streets. And those gloomy residents I spotted here and there before were nowhere to be found today, not a one.

Maybe they were avoiding me, too. I searched my memory for clues, and recalled the gossiping old ladies on the first day.

“Is it all right to let them stay at that mansion?” - I’m sure they said that.

The residents of the mansion, Mischa and Phil... I hadn’t felt anything odd about them so far. And the people who came to and went from the mansion... while they did give me the impression of being awfully zealous about Mischa’s singing, they were all carefree, cheery people, nothing suspect.

...“All cheery people” made me wonder. Well, maybe people with a gloomy disposition just never even got the thought of visiting

someone else's house.

As I was thinking about it, a person passed by. I hid behind the tree and observed them. He was a young man with a face as sullen as a cloudy sky.

"...Do you have a moment?"

I nimbly got out in front of the man and put on a smile. He seemed surprised, letting out a little scream.

"U-Uhh..."

"I'm on a trip, see. I just wanted to ask you something. I can offer you a reward if necessary," I told him weakly. I acted as much like a passing weakling as I could. That would get people to trust you, as long as they didn't sense any malicious intent.

"No... I don't need any reward. If it's just for a second, it's fine," the young man acknowledged.

Saying he didn't want to talk here, the man led me to a nearby bench, and I followed him without saying much.

Once we sat down on the bench, the young man started talking before I could.

"Um... You're the traveler who came here two days ago, right? You look the same as what everyone's saying. Is it true they're letting you stay at that mansion?"

I was a little thrown off. I didn't expect for him to start talking, and about that.

"Yes, it is... Is there something about that mansion?"

"Well, it's the mansion, but it's more like something odd is going on in the whole town..." His head lowered with a clouded look.

"Something odd?"

It caught my attention straight away, but asking directly would probably be counterproductive. So I just repeated the words back and waited a bit to hear it from his mouth.

“...There are those cheery townspeople, you know. Those startlingly carefree people. There are rumors among us... about how they might be monsters.”

I was stunned. So these gloomy people were saying the same thing about the cheery ones. They both suspected the others of being monsters.

“We hear all these strange stories lately. Someone’s dead grandfather passing by looking as if nothing happened, a girlfriend who moved far away sitting on a bench and laughing... So everyone’s exhausted. There are even rumors that the songstress at that mansion might be summoning up ghosts with her song.”

“Someone who moved far away isn’t necessarily dead. It wouldn’t be too odd if they came back for some business, would it?”

“Well, it’s my ex-girlfriend, actually. We broke up and she moved away, so I don’t know if she’s alive or not... But I’m sure there’s no business she’d have back here.”

Even so, that was no good reason to jump to speculation about ghosts and monsters. Though considering these gloomy people’s position, maybe it wasn’t surprising that they would.

Irrational things were happening around them. So they went looking for an explanation with at least a little consistency, wanting to prove that they weren’t just losing it.

“So no one will go near that mansion, or those cheery people. We heard the news that they were apparently letting you stay at the mansion, and... Um, this is kind of hard to ask directly, but... I

was wondering if you were a ghost, or..."

Aha, so that's why these gloomy townspeople wouldn't come near me. Why I couldn't find one even walking all over the place. Sure, it was a big town, but in two days, rumors could spread to most everyone. And the more they wanted to stay away from me, the harder it would be for someone with no familiarity with the town to find them.

"So that's it... But no, I'm no ghost. Want to feel it for yourself?"

"Oh, I realize that talking to you now. Though I was startled when you talked to me, and got worried you were here to take me to the afterlife..."

The young man smiled wryly. So did I, figuring he must be quick to believe anything. But I couldn't blame him for having difficulty making calm judgements when he was so haggard.

"There's something I want to ask, too. Are you familiar with the bluebird?"

"Bluebird... Uh, yes. There has been a legend like that in this town for a long time. But it's just a legend. Even if rumors are spreading lately about it really existing... Those started at about the same time I started hearing other weird rumors. So even if it is true, it's not bringing any happiness."

The young man's face grew darker and darker as he spoke to me. I couldn't imagine that he'd be lying about this. So what he said held a lot of credibility.

In other words, the rumor about the bluebird said to have started around the same time became highly credible, too.

"Thank you very much for telling me."

"No problem... Please be careful, traveler. Because you might

get dragged to the other side, not even kidding.”

With that, the young man stood up, bowed a couple times, and quickly walked away.

Well, now I'd gotten to speak with the so-called gloomy residents as well. And it seemed that the people of this town were suspecting each other of being monsters, ghosts, that kind of thing.

I didn't know why things had gotten like this, but I became convinced that the bluebird was involved in this in some way, shape, or form.

“Seems that bringing happiness isn't a cute thing, that's for sure.”

I shrugged and leaned back on the bench. Quickly surveying my surroundings, I took out a box and lighter from my pocket and checked inside the box. There were still a few cigarettes left.

I took one out and lit it. I used to smoke all the time, but cut back more and more once Efi showed up. A certain feathered informant told me that cigarette smoke isn't good for dragons, either.

I wondered once if Efi's ability to breathe fire could prove useful for times like this, and had her light a cigarette for me.

Suffice to say, more than just the cigarette ended up on fire.

Thinking about it again, I wasn't sure why I had even gotten the idea to try such a stupid experiment. Maybe it was sheer curiosity. ...That sure taught me how dangerous sheer curiosity is.

“...Doesn't taste very good.”

Watching the white smoke hanging in the air, I spaced out and thought.

Maybe it was because it was a different brand than usual, or maybe because it just brought up bad recollections, but I didn't feel

any better once I was done with the cigarette. I thought of reaching for a second, but decided I'd rather not waste time here.

With a sigh, I pressed the shortened cigarette into an ashtray by the bench and shoved the pack back into my pocket. The sun was already getting pretty low.

Let's cut it here for today. Feels like some ugly developments are ahead. But I wouldn't leave empty-handed after coming this deep.

"I'll find you, I swear..."

So long as I didn't sense any threat to my life, I'd go as deep as I needed to. I never wanted to put my life on the line, but most anything else I would. I'd get all the details on this stuff, and use it to get big money out of the hat informant. There was no way I was coming out of this with nothing to show for it.

Those thoughts eased my mind better than any cigarette.

"Oh, welcome back. You were out quite late..."

When I got back to the mansion, Mischa, sitting in a chair, turned around and greeted me warmly. I'd been so sure Efi was gonna pounce on me again like yesterday, so it threw me off a little.

"Ah, hello... Huh? Where's Efi?"

I looked around the hall and saw no sign of her. Maybe she was lost or something?

"Oh, there's no need to worry." Mischa beckoned toward the far side of the round table, outside my vision.

I looked over and saw Efi asleep, using Mischa's lap as a pillow.

"...! Sorry, it seems I've caused you a lot of bother..."

"Oh, no, she just seemed tired from talking to me. If anyone's to blame, it's me."

She replied with a slight giggle, but it was no laughing matter to me. Efiii... I glared at her as she slept soundly.

Before I could come to a decision on whether to wake Efi, Mischa asked me a question.

"It seems you've been walking about outside a lot today. Were you looking for something?"

"Yes, that's right. Did I look exhausted again...?"

"Why, yes. I thought it was a rather tired look for mere sightseeing."

I'd been trying to put on a smile, but I guess some fatigue was showing through after all. Didn't exactly grow up in kind circumstances, but I felt like I was getting especially tired these past few days.

"Have I gotten you that curious?", I asked with a bitter smile, and she nodded.

"Hahaha, sorry. You were having a nice relaxing time, and I show up looking like this..."

"Oh, I don't mind."

Mischa smiled, but I began to feel an inkling of something off about her.

"Well, I'll take an early rest. ...And I'll be taking Efi with me."

I shook her body, but the vibrations shook Mischa too, so I gently picked Efi up. From there, I put her over my shoulder, but she still wouldn't wake up. She was completely knocked out.

"You carry her quite boldly," Mischa remarked at the sight.

"Not to worry. This is an ordinary day for us."

I bowed and quickly walked to our room upstairs.

"...Are you really awake?"

“Super duuuper awake,” Efi replied in a more muffled voice than usual.

Efi woke up the instant I arrived at the room, so I let her down on the bed. But she had been totally knocked out a moment ago, thus... this.

“Well, let’s put together our info.”

“Kay...”

Ignoring her pathetic reply, I summed up the info I’d gathered.

“The residents here are split into two groups, of... cheery people and gloomy people. Also, both of them believe that the other group is something inhuman. You have any thoughts about that?”

“Hmm... It was all cheery people who came to see miss singer. And I haven’t heard anything from anyone about, um, gloomy people.”

So no one coming here was spouting that stuff to Efi, it seemed. Of course, there was no reason for it to come up if you weren’t looking for it.

“Well... Next, let’s talk anything we thought was weird. As usual, if you think of anything, say it.”

Efi nodded. Or wait, was she nodding off again? I lightly pinched her chin, and she raised her head with a gasp.

“First off, Mischa asked me this: “It seems you’ve been walking about outside a lot today. Were you looking for something?””

“What’s weird about that?”, Efi puzzled.

“I went out yesterday, and the day before that. But she only pointed it out today. ’Course, this much might not mean anything; you could interpret it as her just being curious about it for a while.”

I thought I was doing a pretty clear-cut explanation, but Efi

kept shaking her head left and right. She looked like a toy doll with a shaking head.

“The “today” part is what feels off. As I said, today wasn’t my first time going out. So was there a reason to include that word?”

“Hmm... Maybe? Not?”

Yep, she didn’t understand. It was obvious, the way she added the “not.”

Of course, talking to Efi was just a means of sorting out the info for myself, so it didn’t seem like a problem.

“Oh, well, I had something similar, too!”

I was genuinely surprised to hear that. She always just answered what I asked; it was rare she brought me any info herself. Though... I didn’t know what she had to say yet.

“This morning, mister butler brought me some tasty treats. They were, um... macarons? And I ate them! And they were all fluffy and sweet...”

“Not looking for info on macarons.”

She was starting to get oddly fierce about macarons for some reason, so I cut her off.

“Err... Right! So then the singer lady came back from the bath, so I talked to her while I ate. Then she said, “So you like sweet things, do you, Efi?””

“I see...”

That was strange, alright. She should have been able to tell Efi liked sweet stuff from day one. I mean, we’d had that dispute about handing over the cookies right in front of her eyes.

And afterward, when Efi pouted about wanting to eat cookies, Mischa said: “Please enjoy them for yourself, little sweet-lover Efi!” Yes, she certainly said that.

But in that case, something else was off. The fact that, if that were a lie, nothing happened when she made that statement with Efi around.

Efi had the ability to sense lies. Whether Efi herself could sense them was a mystery, but the ability that allowed her to feed on these lies reacted when people lied.

Lies, even if you intend to tell them, are something that stick to you. Lies full of guilty feelings and regret gather and turn into something bigger. And that's how a person can be completely taken by lies. When that happens, it's dark times ahead. But Efi could sense the lies haunting people, materialize them, and eat them.

Of course, there were lies which this ability couldn't detect too. When the liar didn't feel any regret or anything about their lie.

The only people who could get away with coolly lying in front of Efi were really good liars. To put it simply, real assholes like me.

I couldn't imagine Mischa being in the same league. So the other possibility I could derive was...

"...Guess I'll go talk with Mischa myself tomorrow."

Without some confirmation from her, I couldn't conclude anything. So I'd go see Mischa before I went out tomorrow.

...Come to think of it, Efi wasn't responding. She'd usually give an "mm" or whatnot when I said something. I looked over to her, and saw her asleep with arms and legs spread wide.

Did they seriously talk that much...? Mischa sure didn't look too tired. When she sang, she was able to keep up a powerful volume, so maybe she had stamina that belied her appearance.

As my thoughts drifted into pointless territory, I lifted up Efi's body and moved her to the other bed. As I pulled the covers over her, she kicked them away. ...Not the world's greatest sleeper.

I pulled them up again and went back to my bed. With any luck, there would be major progress tomorrow. With that final thought, I fell asleep.

[???]

“Mischa, do you like to sing?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I remember it well. My name, and that I liked to sing. My beloved family. I remember it well.”

She smiled with a hint of loneliness. I didn’t want her to look so sad.

“I love your singing, Mischa.”

“Heehee. I’m glad.”

I lifted myself slightly, and snuck a little closer to her on the bench.

“Will you remember how I love your singing?”

“Yes, yes. I love that you would say that. So I’m sure I’ll remember.”

I felt a kind of excitement and sorrow about that. I knew how it would turn out, Mischa remembering or not.

“Well, I’ll remember.”

Mischa looked taken aback for a moment and turned back toward me.

“I’ll... remember,” I muttered again, this time to convince myself. Mischa said “I see,” and gently smiled.

She couldn’t protect herself. She was unable to protect herself from the monster eating away at her.

So I wanted to protect her. There was no reason for it. It was just what I wished I could do.

“You’re a kind person, Phil.”

I still can’t forget the look she had on her face then.

[Day Four]

Efi shook me awake. I was just having a hard time getting up lately. Probably had to do with how tired I was getting.

“Um, what time is it?”

That’s what I wanted to know... I took out a clock from the bag by the bed. It was already past 12. That’s more than just oversleeping.

I took Efi to leave the room. The moment the door opened, clear singing came from the hall below.

“It’s the singer lady!”

“Is she always singing down there?”

“Yeah, all the town people come in the day, and she sings and talks to them every day.”

I remembered the butler Phil had said something like that when we first arrived. But I was usually out of the mansion at this time, so I didn’t think she honestly sang every day. Cutting her song short to talk to her when there were people around seemed pretty uncouth.

Though those people were all cheerful and carefree, simply asking questions could risk getting a knife in my back. Besides, you could say Mischa’s song was healing me.

“Let’s go listen to her song.”

“Okay!”

Looking down at the banquet hall from the second floor, I began to quietly hear Mischa’s song. It was a different one from the one I heard on our arrival.

“Miss singer’s singing is really wonderful, huh?”

“She’s not called a songstress for nothing.”

As I gave an uninteresting reply, the song entered what seemed to be the most rousing part.

“...Has she ever sung the same song?”

“Hm?” Efi responded with confusion. She probably hadn’t, then.

“Hmm... I don’t think so.”

“I see.”

It was a shaky answer, but Efi wasn’t that much of a moron. I made a mental note that she sang a different song every day, and went back to focusing on said singing.

“Oh, Al and Efi! Good day,” Mischa greeted as she poured some tea. “If it’s all right with you, would you like to dine?” The teapot shook slightly in her hand.

I politely declined. “I just want to talk for a little bit.”

“The day I arrived here, I brought back some food for Efi, and she says she wants me to get the same thing again... But I’ve forgotten what it was. Since you were there with us, Mischa, I thought you might remember.”

Mischa’s expression hardened slightly. “You came here... three days ago, yes?”, she replied slowly.

“Yes, that’s right.”

I waited for her reply. She appeared to be deep in thought, then quietly lowered her head.

“I’m sorry... I wouldn’t know, either.”

“Is that so? No, I’m sorry for interrupting your tea time. Please, enjoy.”

I bowed to Mischa and tapped Efi’s shoulder. She yelped “ah!” and followed me, waving goodbye to Mischa.

“Where are we going?”

“To see that butler.”

Efi told me the butler and songstress had been good friends for a long time. So it seemed guaranteed he’d know something about Mischa.

There were two possibilities I was considering. First was that for whatever reason, Mischa had lost her memory.

Efi had spent quite some time with Mischa over the past few days. She gave me no reports of witnessing any major incidents, so the “whatever reason” was beyond me for now. But maybe, just maybe, it had to do with the reason for the townspeople acting strange.

The other possibility was that the Mischa I first met and this Mischa were different people.

In that case, I could see a connection between this and the ghost stories that gloomy citizen mentioned, like “seeing his dead grandpa.”

But personally, I couldn’t imagine that there were two different Mischas. I didn’t know which was the real one, but the real Mischa at least would have no reason to lie, and if she did lie, lie-eating Efi should have noticed.

“There’s mister butler!”

Efi brought me out of my thoughts. I looked at where she was pointing. Phil was cleaning a large garden past the terrace.

He stopped to look back at us. “Oh, good day. Is something the matter? Are you lost again?”

“Nah! I’m not lost today!”, Efi replied vigorously.

Did you really get so lost in the mansion as to come way out here? Seemed like quite a distance from the banquet hall... But this

wasn't the time to ask that.

I broke the peaceful air between the two and asked Phil a question.

"Excuse me, can we talk for a moment?"

*

I'll protect her. So that she can smile and live happily.

Ever since I was little, I offered everything to her. There was no definite reason for it. I simply did it because I wanted to.

While tending to the garden, I had a sudden thought.

Is it really right to keep things this way?

Before I could answer that, I heard footsteps from behind. I turned around to see the traveling siblings who had come here a few days prior, Al and Efi.

"...What is it?"

It appeared these two had been searching for something since coming to town. So I found my pulse naturally quickening.

"About Miss Mischa... Pardon my rudeness, but has she ever been especially forgetful?"

Suddenly being asked exactly what I didn't want to be, I was at a loss for words. How should I answer that?

"I asked her earlier about an event she should have witnessed the day we first arrived at the mansion. But she was completely unable to answer. This alone could be passed off as her carelessly forgetting... Yet actually, a number of conversations have made me wonder."

"...Such as what?"

“To be specific... She’s reacted as if learning something for the first time to things which she should already know. And yet she shows no signs of trying to fool or tease us. So I considered that something had affected her memories.”

I was overcome with unease and impatience. “...Did you ask Mischa that?”

This was extremely bad. Mischa could not be told her own memories were gone. Because it would make her grieve so.

And that wasn’t the only thing it would be bad for her to know. There was also...

“No, of course I couldn’t just ask her “Do you have no memory of it?” I asked enough that I could surmise it.”

Paying no mind to my silence, Al went on. I’ll keep my composure. That should prevent anything from leaking out.

“Now, let’s see... Did she suffer a strong blow to the head, perhaps? Or else, I’ve heard that illness or genes can lead to severe forgetfulness even in youth. Or maybe it’s even possible someone is intentionally erasing her memories. Would you know anything, Phil?”

“Would this have something to do with what you are investigating in town?”

Al nodded. “Yes.”

Figuring it might have caused more trouble, I didn’t ask exactly what they were investigating. But I wondered what it had to do with Mischa.

“Is that so. ...Well, I suppose it was Charlotte who you met.”

“Charlotte...?” Al’s eyes widened at my surely-unexpected answer.

Well, it was true - or rather, not. It was unexpected even for

me. It was a random lie which I found escaping my mouth.

“Mischa has a twin sister who comes to visit us on occasion.”

Having said this much, I couldn't stop now. I couldn't say I felt nothing about having lied.

But... I had no choice.

I felt my body growing heavy. From guilt, I suppose. Or, wait...

Was it actually heavy?

“Waugh!”

A black object was wrapped around my leg. While in shape, it resembled something cute like a cat, it was covered in some kind of dark mud with pieces falling off - something I truly couldn't comprehend.

I desperately tried to shake it away, but the monster didn't move an inch off my leg.

“So, you lied.”

Hearing Al speak, I looked up at him.

“Not to worry. It's still just a little lie. As long as you don't lie anymore, it won't attack you.”

“Can I eat it?”, Efi asked from beside Al, her eyes sparkling.

What in the world was all this?

“Geez, you're hungry?”

“I wanna eat it!”

“Alright, alright. Go for it.”

After having the conversation, Efi leapt toward my leg. She did so with such force, I tipped over and fell on my behind.

“Ack... Ah, sorry. Just stay like that and let me talk, please.”

I was in no position to say no. A monster was wrapped tight around my leg, so I couldn't even run. I weakly nodded.

“All right... I'll explain that monster that appeared on your leg,

but first, I'll explain Efi. First, Efi is a dragon. Do you know about dragons?"

"Naturally, I do. A species which is born with strange powers, yes?"

"Right. In Efi's case, it's the power to eat lies. When someone lies, she can give that lie form and eat it. That's what the monster on your leg is."

I returned my gaze to my leg, and the monster was gone; instead, it was in Efi's hands.

Stuffing her cheeks with the monster, she had a satisfied expression like eating a delicious meal. She certainly did seem to be eating it.

"Well, it seems you understand. So, next. Why did you lie?"

I felt a sharp glare on me. He had seen through everything.

"I'm sorry..."

An apology came out of my mouth. I couldn't lie in front of these people. I could see that quite clearly.

"Mischa... is sick. Due to a sickness she was born with, all her memories vanish once every three days."

I slowly began to tell them about Mischa. Al listened with a serious look.

"She seems to remember things important to her, such as her name, her family. That she loves to sing. All other memories... even those of me, she forgets in three days."

My voice trembled. This was something I'd understood for such a long time, yet my heart quivered.

"But... if she were told that. To tell her that in three days, she would even forget about her sickness... it would make her so sad. I did tell her once, long ago... And I never want her to feel the way

she did then ever again. So... won't you keep quiet to her?", I implored, my head hung low.

What was I doing, lying to them and then making a request? But I had my back to the wall.

"It's all right."

I was startled to hear a much kinder voice than I'd expected.

"Actually, the fact of Efi being a dragon isn't something people should hear either, so... Rare things are that much more likely to be hunted down, you know. And I, too, was forced into being unable to hide it. So, let's both keep a secret."

With a wry smile, Al also made a request of me.

His mood was shockingly different from his relentless deductions a moment ago. I wondered if he might have been hiding something bigger yet.

"...I understand."

I stood up from my shameful position on the ground. Al lent me a hand in getting up.

"Mister butler, you won't lie anymore?"

Suddenly, Efi hit where it hurt, and I felt a regret akin to fatigue. She seemed to be done with her meal, patting her slightly fuller belly.

...She really did eat lies. Dragons are strange creatures indeed.

"No, I have learned that I can't lie in front of you."

Efina made a face showing a little bit of disappointment. Had she been hoping for seconds?

"...Well then, we have investigations to do."

Al bowed and smiled at me. I apologized again with a bow and saw them off.

“...Are you okay? That looked like it was tough.”

Once Al and Efi were completely out of sight, a voice came from behind me, where no one should have been.

When I turned around, standing before me was the bluebird.

“Bluebird...”

Though she was called the bluebird, she simply had large bird wings on a human back. So I still couldn’t get used to that name.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Didn’t you say your existence couldn’t be spoken of to humans?”

“Did I?”

She played dumb, then calmly smiled. The deep blue wings on her back shook in the wind.

My meeting with the bluebird occurred while I was sorting out the mansion’s storeroom.

Though, to be exact, she didn’t yet have the form she does now. When I found her, she was only a giant egg.

What kind of egg is this?, I wondered. But leaving it here, it seemed likely to break. So I carefully picked it up - and just then, a crack ran through the shell.

Oh no; did I handle it too roughly? As I worried, the cracks began to spread across the egg. Soon, a creature like a human child showed her face from inside.

I describe her as “like” a human because of the large wings which grew from her back. Beautiful wings which seemed to hold blue skies inside them. For a few seconds, I was taken by their beauty.

“...Who are you?”, I found myself saying, trying to figure out

what this child was.

“Huh? Me? Hmm. Who would I be?”

She only responded back with another question. Not knowing how to respond, I smiled wryly.

“Oh, I know this much. I came to grant your wishes.”

“Huh?”

Grant... my wishes?

“Then... Might you be the “bluebird”?”

There had long been a legend in this town. It spoke of a mythical being who would grant any wish and make people happy.

Seeing the blue wings on her back, I began to feel it was her.

“If you’ll call me that.”

What an ambiguous answer. But that didn’t matter to me. The important thing was that she might grant my wish.

“Well, this is sudden... but can I make a wish now?”

“Yeah? What?”

I’d always had but one wish.

“...I have a friend named Mischa. I want you to cure her sickness.”

“Hmm...”

Would she really grant my wish? She wouldn’t ask for a suitable payment, would she? Though I’d stated my wish with such determination, I quickly felt uneasy.

However, the bluebird shook her head. “I don’t think my power can grant that one,” she answered all aloof.

What...? So she *can’t* grant any wish? Though I was visibly disappointed, she seemed to pay me no mind and asked another question.

“Anything else?”

But the wish I'd just asked for was my most heartfelt wish. Nothing else could possibly come to mind. I only wish for Mischa... At that point in my thoughts, I did have one idea.

"Ah... Well then, Mischa's happiness. I want for Mischa to never be sad, and always be happily smiling."

Once I'd spoken it, I realized it was a fairly vague wish. Maybe this wouldn't do either.

"Ahh, maybe even I can do that one. Sure."

"Huh?"

Truly? Hearing that wholly unexpected reply, I felt anxious whether it was really alright.

"No worries. Your Mischa will definitely be happy."

Then, the bluebird spread her wings wide.

Once they spanned the whole storeroom, the room lit up with a flash of light.

"Now your wish is granted."

I timidly opened my eyes. The bluebird stood there with just about the same expression as before.

"...Was that the end of it?"

"Yep."

That was a disappointment. Though, I hadn't gone outside yet, so I didn't know how things might have changed.

"Your wish is granted, probably," the bluebird boasted, ending with a word that only added to my unease.

"I'm the bluebird. So what should I call you?"

Come to think of it, I hadn't told her my name yet.

"Err..."

"Phil."

I raised my head and looked at the bluebird.

"...You really did grant my wish, didn't you?"

"If you think so."

The bluebird would always reply ambiguously like this to my questions.

"What were you thinking about?"

"Just reminiscing a bit about when I met you."

"Oh yeah... I was nude, so you were blushing real bad."

...I'd prefer to have not discussed that.

"Is it okay even if you can't be happy, Phil?"

"I'm fine. If Mischa is happy, then that's a happy thing for me as well... Ah, yes, my cleaning was interrupted. I should get back to that..."

I picked up the broom fallen to the side. Yes. Even if I couldn't be happy myself, this was fine.

*

"What're we gonna do now?"

Al was walking quick. I was doing my best not to get left in the dust.

"I'm going out to look for the bluebird."

When he reached the big door in the entrance hall, Al finally stopped.

"Hold down the fort?"

"Yeah."

Again... But oh well. I'm a good kid, so I keep promises!

"Efi, stay in this mansion. If you find the bluebird, you can just report it to me when I get back."

“Why’re you hurrying to look all of a sudden?”

“I’m starting to suspect the bluebird’s a dragon.”

The bluebird, a dragon...? But it’s a bird.

“Dragon? Like me?”

“Yeah. I can’t imagine this is the work of a human. As soon as someone said they saw it, things started getting weird in town. If the bluebird really exists, it’s highly likely it’s a dragon that’s the cause of all this weirdness.”

Al patted my head and reached for the door handle.

“And if the bluebird’s a dragon, then what’s its power...? Causing memory loss? In that case, townspeople who had their bad memories erased would be cheery, and those who had happy memories erased would be gloomy... That could be it. But powers seem to vary between dragons, so I can’t narrow it down yet...”

Muttering to himself about complicated stuff, Al left the mansion.

“The singer lady’s not here...”

I looked under the round table in the hall and behind small trees and everywhere, but I couldn’t find the songstress.

“Maybe she’s taking a nap?”

But even if she was, Al told me it was bad to go into people’s rooms without permission.

“What should I do...?”

I twisted my head and thought. Al always did that when he was thinking.

Oh yeah, mister butler was in that big garden earlier. Maybe I could talk to him?

“Let’s do it!”

And so six seconds later, I came to an answer.

“Huh?”

I came back to the big garden, but even mister butler was gone.

“Mmgh...” I hadn’t *thought* about what if the butler was gone. Now what?

“Hello.”

As I worried over what to do, I heard a voice beside me. It wasn’t a voice I’d heard before.

I turned and saw a strange person with blue wings sitting on the fence around the garden.

“Hello! I’m Efi! But Efi’s fine!”

I shouted my super-important introduction. The blue-winged person seemed a little surprised.

“You’re energetic, huh? I’m the bluebird.”

“Huh?”

Bluebird? Al said he was looking for the bluebird, right?

“But you’re not a bird, are you?”

“If you say so, Efi, then maybe.”

Maybe? Hmm... The things this person said seemed a little too complicated for me. But I remembered what Al said earlier.

“Miss bluebird, are you a dragon?”

“I’m the bluebird.”

The bluebird. She introduced herself to me, and those lie monsters didn’t show up. So miss bluebird wasn’t lying. So, that meant... I don’t know.

“I was looking for somebody to talk to. Wanna talk?”

“Okay, sure.”

Alright! If we could talk, maybe I'd hear something about the bluebird. Al really wanted to know about the bluebird, so I'm sure he'd be glad when I told him about this!

"What's a dragon?", the bluebird asked, hopping down from the fence.

"Uhh, well, they've got all these powers, and, uh... They can fly!"

That was the number one explanation of dragons I could muster.

Of course, I *could* fly, but Al told me not to go flying off on my own, so I wouldn't fly most of the time.

"Huh, that's neat."

"I can't since I'm told not to fly off on my own, but you've got wings, huh?"

"Yeah. Never used them, but maybe I can fly."

Miss bluebird jumped a little bit off the ground and flapped her wings. With a flappy sound, she floated in the air.

"Wooow!"

"But I'm a bird, so of course I can fly, right?"

She didn't seem that surprised, and gently landed on the ground.

"I guess so..."

"Having wings, having cool powers. Yeah, maybe we're similar."

"But you're not a dragon, right?"

"Uh-huh. 'Cause I'm the bluebird. Phil calls me that, so I think so."

Because of mister butler? Al told me "you're Efina," and that's why I call myself that too. Maybe that's how it is for everyone?

"So is mister butler... Is Phil your papa, miss bluebird?"

"Hmm, maybe not that. Phil is Phil. If I had to say, maybe he's my friend."

When I was born, I instinctively thought of Al as my papa. Al said that was a "characteristic" of dragons. So, maybe miss bluebird really was just a bluebird.

"Oh yeah, keep me a secret to everyone else, okay?"

"Why?"

"No specific reason. I just say it to everybody," she said with an unfazed look. But I always keep promises!

"Okay! I won't tell anybody!"

"Right."

Did that reply mean "it's a promise"?

"Well, I'm getting sleepy, so I'm gonna take a nap."

The bluebird yawned, and I yawned too.

"You're tired too, Efi? Well, good night."

The bluebird floated off the ground, and went over to the other side of the fence.

"Uhh... Let's get our info in order! Miss bluebird was miss bluebird... and can fly! That is all!"

Alright. Now whenever Al came back, I'd be all set!

*

"...Excuse me, do you have a moment?"

I talked to a resident passing beside me. Or to be exact, beside a sculpture I was hiding behind.

"Huh? Oh, er, I..."

"Just for a moment!", I pleaded in a way difficult to take as

gloomy nor serious. The sullen middle-aged woman hesitantly heard my request.

“Are you familiar with the rumors of the bluebird?”

“Oh... yes. I believe it appeared about a year ago...”

“A year ago?”

If that were true, it was some pretty helpful info. I wanted to be sure it was accurate.

“I heard about it from my master... About a year ago, apparently he met the bluebird. She even introduced herself as the bluebird, and had these blue wings...”

“...The bluebird can talk?”

“It seems she did. He said that she had wings on her back, but looked much like a human.”

An appearance much like a human... Maybe the bluebird really was a dragon. Although... actually, there were some humans who had wings too. I knew such a feathered friend myself.

“Um, is that all?”, the woman asked, looking at me dubiously.

“Oh, yes. Thank you for telling me that.”

I thanked her with a bow and quickly ended the conversation. If I probed people too deeply, rumor could very well spread among the gloomy townspeople about that traveler grabbing people and grilling them for info.

“...Would be nice if Efi had some findings too,” I suddenly thought once the woman was out of sight.

I'd started today by scouring the town for the bluebird from the moment I left the mansion. The townspeople I questioned told me what they knew, but it was all stuff I'd heard before.

After that, I decided to stick to questioning gloomy people like so. Since they were avoiding me, I could only ask a scant few. But

three of them had met the bluebird, or knew someone who had, allowing me to get some fairly solid info.

And the information I got from those three all had something in common. They all said the bluebird spoke the language of humans, and that it had the appearance of a human with wings growing from their back.

Like I said, some types of human had wings too. But I'd never heard of those people having special powers - like the power to make people happy.

"...Time to go back."

Just thinking about it seemed unproductive. The stress was building from days of questioning. Maybe I gave up my train of thought a little early, but I decided to head back to the mansion for the day.

The instant I opened the front door, Efi leapt on me. She hit right around my stomach, so I groaned and nearly fell over.

"What? You're awfully energetic."

"Um, I met the bluebird!"

"...!"

No way. Efi really did have some findings of her own? Now this was lucky.

"Oh, really? Good job. Well, let's get back to the room and talk."

"Okay! Oh!"

Efi had a look of remembrance and held out her hand.

"Where's today's snack?"

"Oh."

...I'd completely forgotten.

“...Cheer up already.”

“But you broke your promise, Al!”

Efi was stuck like this once we got back to the room. She wouldn't look me in the eye. I'd utterly hurt her feelings.

“I never said I'd buy you something every day, anyway.”

“Mmgh...” She glimpsed toward me.

I reached into the bag by the bed for the candy from the other day and shook it in front of Efi. “Here, the leftover candy. You ate a lie today too, so put up with it.”

Efi's eyes watched it shake, then she calmly took it from my hand.

“I'll deal!”

“Now, let me hear about the bluebird. You met her, right?”

“Mmfh, fhuh mhh mgh mhuh!”

“...Push the candy to the side of your mouth before you talk.”

Efi quickly shifted over the candy. Then she began to speak, albeit still not entirely clearly.

“Miss bluebird wasn't a dragon. I asked, are you a dragon?, and she said, I'm the bluebird!”

“And no lie monster came out?”

“Nope. So miss bluebird is miss bluebird! Oh, and she flew!”

Efi used her hands to illustrate flapping wings.

“You've got wings too... Is there a point to that gesturing?”

“I mean, my wings aren't big like miss bluebird's...”

So they were big wings? I'd heard the size of a dragon's wings indicated the extent of their ability.

“Just to make sure, the bluebird looked like a human, right? And she just had big wings on her back.”

“Yeah, that’s right!”

Again, it coincided with the stories I’d heard from the townspeople. But I hadn’t imagined she’d show up in the mansion.

“And where did the bluebird go? When will she appear next?”

“Umm... I dunno...”

Efi told me that the bluebird said she was sleepy and left. If it was true that she only showed up once a week like the townspeople said, this was going to get tedious, no doubt. Not to mention...

“So she’s not a dragon...”

If no lie monster appeared, it must have been true. I felt closer to the truth, but also that much further away.

“...I’m gonna sleep and let it sort out.”

“Does sleeping do that?”

“When humans are asleep, their brains’ll just sort out info for them on their own.”

I’d heard that somewhere, at least. I didn’t know if it was accurate, but I didn’t really care. I did know from experience that your head worked better if you’d slept well instead of being sleep-deprived.

“Well, I’ll sort stuff out too! Good night!”

“Wait.”

As she hurried to get in bed, I grabbed Efi by the collar and lifted her up.

“What?! I’m trying to go to bed!”

“That’s my bed.”

Efi stuck out her tongue and looked away from me.

**The Lie-Eating Dragon
and the Forgotten-Color Songstress
< II >**

[Day Five]

I didn't do any oversleeping today, and managed to get up at the usual time. Maybe getting to bed early last night had worked out.

I left Efi with an instruction to search the mansion for the bluebird again. As for myself, I wandered the town as always.

I'd heard that the bluebird would appear before townspeople - even the gloomy ones. And since those people found the mansion too eerie to approach, that indicated these meetings had to be outside the mansion.

So there was a need to search out here too, and a decent likelihood of finding her. ...But likelihood alone doesn't mean anything. Assuming that "only appearing once a week" was true, my investigation was rendered fundamentally useless...

"Sure feels like a standstill..."

Truthfully, having not personally met the bluebird, I felt like I was making no progress. Maybe it'd be better to search with Efi in the mansion?

Just then, I saw a huge shadow from overhead.

"Hm?"

Something was flying in the sky. It was no bird.

It looked like a person with wings growing from their back, but it was not the bluebird. It had a familiar face, so I knew I couldn't be mistaken.

While I pondered, the flying man noticed me, and gradually descended down to the ground.

No, that's fine. You can stay up there.

"...It's been a few months."

Despite my plea, the man gracefully touched down in front of me and started talking.

He had blue hair with bits of white in it, and two hair pins in different colors. Over his right eye was a black eyepatch. And he had a stupidly huge build. He was a dragon, captain of the police force, named Neil.

“What brings the captain of the force way out here? Sightseeing?”

“No,” Neil shrugged, smiling bitterly. “As you can see, I’m on duty.”

Me and the captain here had a familiarity with each other since I was little. His force was an organization that set out to investigate and resolve cases all around the country. I always had a slight habit of getting tangled up in such cases, so he was a man I happened to meet often.

“What name are you using nowadays?”

“Al.”

And he could, of course, read me rather easily. So there was no need to cover up my normal attitude.

“Al, I see. If you’re here, that’s better proof than any something is afoot in town.”

“That’s a bit heartless, captain...”

Then again, I felt the same way. The police being sent out here told me that yes, something was afoot.

But was it the work of humans, or otherwise? It’d be good to get some more information out of the captain.

“Hm? Whoa!”

Suddenly, a black mist of sorts came up from my feet, and I quickly stepped away. Sensing danger, I took out the knife hidden

on my waist and pointed it at the mist.

“Ah, sorry. Seems that startled you. This black shadow is my subordinate, so drop the wariness,” Neil told me admonishingly.

Shadow? Subordinate? Any subordinate of Neil’s would be a dragon, I supposed.

Well, but also, surely something like this could only be produced by a dragon.

The hazy black mist came together in one spot to become a single cluster. From that cluster emerged a young man characterized by pink hair and a sharp glare. He looked so young, it made me question him being Neil’s “subordinate,” but given the uniform, it seemed to be the truth.

“Captain, I’ve been investigating, and I believe it’s more or less as you’ve supposed.”

“I see. Good work.”

As Neil complimented the young man’s work ethic, he noticed and turned his gaze to me. Or his glare, rather.

“...What?” Why would you glare at me at our very first meeting? This guy has no social skills.

“Captain, who’s this... person?”

The young man ignored me and questioned Neil. Huh, did he dislike me? Couldn’t imagine why.

“He’s Al. And Al, this is Brett. He’s still an apprentice, but he’s very capable.” Neil slapped Brett’s shoulder and pointed toward me.

Despite the introduction, Brett continued to glare at me unabated, not opening his mouth.

“...Sorry. He’s a little shy. Forgive him for that,” Neil apologized, smiling wryly.

I felt this might be stepping over the line of “shy”... And well, more importantly, this Brett guy seemed awfully young to imagine him being with the police.

“Is the force taking on the duty of looking after little brats?”

“How dare you speak like that to the captain?! I’ll drag you out into the city and tear you limb from limb!”

That’s the first thing you’re gonna say to me? Definitely not what you wanna hear from somebody dedicated to protecting peace, either...

“Brett, you’re being rude. Sorry if he’s upsetting you, Al. He’s not great at controlling his power yet either, so don’t get him too stimulated.”

“Hey, I’m not doing anything.”

“I can smell the crime coming off this man!”

Talk about relentless. Granted, that was a spot-on judgement call.

“That may be an accurate intuition, but you need conclusive evidence to pin someone as a criminal. Until we can do that, he’s to be treated as a common citizen for us to protect.”

...Was he actually saying that to defend me or not? Feels like he’s practically saying the answer.

“What was that black mist about?”, I interjected to change the topic. Brett refused to speak to me as usual, so Neil answered for him.

“We call him a shadow dragon. Like you just saw, he can assume the form of a shadow and pass through solid objects. And that ability can be used not only on himself, but on other objects.”

“Handy ability.”

I tried offering a casual compliment, but Brett had no reaction.

Made me feel awkward being here.

“...Say, captain, what’d you come to this town for?”, I pressed, since that was the top thing on my mind. “I’ve only been here a few days myself, but it must be a serious case if you’re coming in person.”

All over this country, there are incidents day after day, big and small. The force had plenty of members they could split up and assign to them all.

Of those, it was mostly murder cases and big disputes that Captain Neil came out in person for. Or... cases that had to do with dragons.

“Right... We received a request from someone in town. Many of the citizens here seem troubled by some rather mysterious phenomena.”

“Mysterious phenomena?”

“Seeing people who should be dead, seeing things that shouldn’t be there. Even being attacked by giant bugs, I heard.”

...That’s rough.

The gloomy residents had told me about seeing ghosts and all that, but if the phenomena were that unrealistic, I began to wonder if some shady drug was spreading around.

“And these phenomena got you to come out here, huh?”

“That’s right. There’s a force we believe could be causing these mysterious events covering the entire town. The townspeople have no idea as to the origin of or reason behind this massive force. We can’t deny a link to criminal organizations or acts of terrorism, so we decided to head over.”

A force covering the entire town?

This town was significantly bigger than your average town, and

that much more populous. If there really was some force looming over it, causing all these strange occurrences... Maybe the gloomy residents, and the mutual belief that the other residents are monsters, could be due to that force's influence.

Neil seemed about to continue, but Brett interrupted with displeasure. "Captain, should you really be divulging our intel to this man?"

"Is there a problem? All I'm saying is to take caution."

"You're giving far too many details for that. He should be plenty cautious already. Time is of the essence. Let's return to our investigation."

Despite being an apprentice, he was already talking like he was on Neil's level. Then again, the power and age of dragons didn't always show in their appearance, so maybe they really were on equal footing.

"Sorry, we should get back to work. Try to keep your distance from any citizens seeing such phenomena if possible, and don't interfere."

"Got it. Oh, right, there's one last thing I want to ask..."

"Captain!"

I called to stop Neil, but Brett shouted to get his attention. The shadow around him swayed like a flame. Maybe he was angry.

"Don't worry, it'll be quick."

If I could just ask him this, it could put a lot of pieces together. So I absolutely wanted to ask it here and now.

"What is it?", Neil responded. Brett gave a sour look and retreated a few steps.

Aha. I could quickly get the info out of Neil with some coercion, but this Brett guy was pretty stubborn. Maybe he'd prove to be a

powerful foe.

“About that force covering the town...”

“...I see. Thank you. I just wanted to know.”

I turned and decided to leave this place. 'Cause I felt like Brett's displeasure gauge was going to max out soon enough.

“Why are you in such a foul mood, anyway?”

I had that sudden thought, and twisted my torso around to say it to Brett.

He stubbornly refused to talk, so I asked again. “We've never met before. So what's the reason for it? If I don't even know why I'm pissing you off so much, I'm not gonna be able to help it.”

Maybe it was like tossing a match into oil. But contrary to what I expected, Brett slowly answered while averting his eyes.

“...I don't know either. But when I see that scar on your cheek, I get irritated all of a sudden. That's all.”

...What an irrational reason.

I'd lowered the scarf covering my mouth to talk to Neil, so the scar on my cheek was visible. But it'd been dealt to me ages ago for reasons which surely had nothing to do with Brett.

Observing the silence between us, Neil mumbled something.

“Did you get that wound... back when you were in that organization?”

“Yeah. Just when I was all glad to be saying goodbye to it.”

“Hmm...” Neil went into pondering. “Dragons generally don't share memories or feelings with their master. But there are rare instances. Maybe Brett is one of them.”

“What do you mean?”, Brett asked with deep interest.

“You see, he used to...”

"Quit it. You're gonna put *me* in a bad mood."

"Ah," Neil responded.

Me being in that organization was something long over with, but the fact was, it still wasn't over. I didn't care for the past, 'cause I had a habit of remembering everything I didn't want to remember.

...But, huh. Dragons influenced by their masters aren't common? If you compared me and Efi, yeah, you'd get that impression. It's not like how a human kid can have a parent's face.

"...Well, 'scuse me. I'll see ya."

I decided there wasn't any more information to extract and got out of there quick.

Neil gave me a goodbye, but Brett said nothing, as grumpy as ever. Shortly afterward, I heard what sounded like a "tch."

*

"Oh!"

I heard a voice singing. It was quiet, but pretty.

"Is it the singer lady?"

I thought I met her in the entrance hall earlier, so did she move?

Well, it was the song she sang, so I figured it was her. It seemed like it was coming over from the big garden.

"Miss singer! ...Huh?"

I got to the garden, but the songstress wasn't there. Instead, there was the bluebird, sitting on a fence and singing.

"Hey, Efi. Good day."

She noticed me and hopped down off the fence. Just then, the song stopped, so I guess she was the one I heard?

“Was that you singing, miss bluebird?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Mischa taught me.”

I knew it. ’Cause it was the song the lady was singing.

“Are you old friends with miss singer?”

“Hmm. I mean, I’ve been with her since I was born... but that’s only a year and some change. So not old friends.”

A year and some change? I looked miss bluebird’s body over. She was a little shorter than me. Do people get this big in a year?

Then again, yeah, she was a bird. And Al did say that there were a bunch of different kinds of “people” now.

“I know Mischa and Phil really well. Even their past. Curious?”

“Do you really? Yeah, I am!”

“Then again, you broke your promise with me. So I wonder...”

Oop. Right, she told me to keep her a secret. But then I went and told Al about her.

“Sorry, miss bluebird...”, I mumbled shamefully. I was a bad kid for breaking that promise.

“Nah, I’m not bothered. I pretty much just say that as a greeting, it’s not even that important.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Miss bluebird didn’t look fazed at all, so I guess she really didn’t mind. Well, then I could not mind it too, I guess?

“Err... Mischa and Phil’s past, right. I can only tell you what I know, though.”

“Who did you hear it from?”

“From Mischa and Phil, of course.”

Huh? She heard about “the past” from miss songstress and mister butler?

“...But miss singer doesn’t remember things, does she?”

That’s what the butler said yesterday. After three days, her memories before that went away. So she couldn’t talk about the past, right?

“True, Mischa has an illness that impairs her memory. But as I think you’ve heard, she doesn’t forget everything. If it’s something important in her past, she seems to remember it.”

Oh yeah. Mister butler did say that too. She’d remember her name and family and important stuff like that.

“Mischa has memories of her past, just vague ones. Like a park bench she always sat on. That must’ve been an important place to her. But she can’t seem to remember what she did there at all.”

“Maybe she sat on the bench and sang?”

“Who knows,” the bluebird muttered, looking off into the distance.

“Every morning Mischa loses her memory, you know what Phil does? He wakes Mischa up, then says “nice to meet you.””

“...But he’s not just meeting her?”

I mean, Phil remembers. Why would he say “nice to meet you”?

“Probably because it’d confuse Mischa. She forgets about Phil, so he wouldn’t want to say “so, we meet again” or anything.”

“Hmm...”

This seems kinda weird. She doesn’t forget her songs or her name. But she forgets about mister butler...?

“What’s up?”

“Even though mister butler has been with her so long...?”

I, too, was only just born and some change, but Al was important to me.

Was mister butler who she'd been with all her life not important to her?

"Yeah. But I think it's just something you gotta accept. It's like a curse, you can't fight it."

"Even though miss singer is such a wonderful person..."

"Doesn't matter. Curses and blessings are handed out equally to everybody."

Who knew equality was so awful... What do you say at a time like this? I guess, yeah, it's gotta be...

"I feel bad for her..."

"Yep. Both the cursed people and the blessed ones. Mischa and Phil are both pitiable people. And I'm sure I'm pitiable too for lending a hand to them."

"Huh?" What did she mean by that?

"Haha, I guess you shouldn't be calling yourself pitiable. That's a call for other people to make."

Then miss bluebird yawned and did a stretch.

"Ahh, I'm tired again today. I get tired easily."

"Why's that?"

"Hmm. Maybe I just get too enthusiastic. I probably don't have to work this hard, but I gotta realize it's for Phil."

"For mister butler?"

She rubbed her sleepy eyes and answered. "Yeah. 'Cause Phil's a precious friend of mine."

"Hmm, I see!"

Miss bluebird was putting in a ton of effort for her friend. I wanted to try harder and harder too. And get bigger!

"Mmm... Can't stay up much longer. Night, Efi."

"Good night, miss bluebird!", I waved as she flapped her wings

and rose into the air.

Dizzy and staggering, she flew over to the other side of the fence.

“Welcome back, Al!”

I laid in wait in the entrance hall, and when Al got back in the evening like usual, welcomed him back with a shout.

Just like the bluebird, Al was always stumbling around when he got back lately.

“Al, are you tired?”

“Yeah, sure am. Well, but this should be over soon. Back to the room.”

Al tugged on my arm and quickly dragged me along. I didn’t have any time to talk, and desperately kept from being left behind.

“...Oh, am I walking a little fast?”

“Nope!”, I answered. But Al slowed down his pace a little bit for me.

In the room, Al took off his jacket and sat on the bed as always. I climbed up next to Al and sat.

“I was able to talk with an acquaintance today. Got to hear about this town, and about the bluebird. And there’s a lot I’ve figured out now. We’ll settle this tomorrow.”

“Al, do you have any friends?”

Al twitched slightly.

“...Don’t have any.”

“Hmm...” I wasn’t sure what response to give, so I just went with that. Maybe Al was a “pitiable person” too...

“...What’s that response supposed to be? Whatever... Anyway,

let's sum up the story so far. First, Mischa. I'm sure you heard this, but she loses her memory every three days."

"But she remembers important things, yeah!"

"Right. And there's a guy who lamented Mischa's illness and wanted to help her."

"Mister butler?"

"You're on fire today. Exactly right. So one day, Phil got the ability to help Mischa. And that had some major influence and damages elsewhere."

"Damages?"

"Just... bad stuff, in general."

In other words, mister butler was trying to help the sick Mischa, but it did something big and bad to this town...?

"Well, why's that?"

"What Phil got was the power of a dragon. I mean, dragon powers are sorta beyond human understanding. Not all that surprising if they could affect a whole town. Anyway, that power starting to influence the town coincides with someone appearing to Phil - the bluebird, who you met. That makes it highly likely the bluebird is a dragon."

"But when I asked miss bluebird 'Are you a dragon?', she said 'I'm the bluebird.' And no lie monster appeared."

Al's face scrunched a little when I reminded him that.

"Yeah, that's right... That's the one thing I think I'll have to ask the bluebird about directly. Heck, we might not be able to get any further until I do."

"Well, miss bluebird was in the garden today, and the day before, so I feel like she'll be there again tomorrow. Maybe you can talk?"

"I see... So not once a week at all, it seems. Okay, I'll talk to her tomorrow. To see if she's a dragon or not, and if Phil is her parent or not."

If Phil's the bluebird's papa...?

"Today, miss bluebird said Phil was a precious friend."

"And did any lie come out?"

"Nope, nothing!"

"I see..."

Al folded his arms and got quiet. Seemed like he was worrying about stuff again. After a while, he let out a big sigh and fell back on the bed.

"Let's stop here for tonight and sleep. Okay, good night."

Al closed his eyes, but I poked him in the belly.

"Wait! One more, just one more!"

There was something I was kind of curious about still. Al looked sort of displeased, but sat up to look at me.

"Still need something?"

"Um, about miss bluebird's power? Is it the same as mine? Can she eat lies too?"

"No, the bluebird... ahh, I'm tired. Tomorrow."

Then Al's head dove into the pillow.

It was something I was really curious about, so I tried shaking him a little, and pinching his cheek, but he flicked my forehead back, so I obediently went to my bed.

Tomorrow, we'd end it. Once it ended, we'd leave the town.

This was how it always was. The time before, and the time before that. Once it ended, we'd leave town and it was over.

Ends are kind of sad things, huh. My heart ached a little, but I closed my eyes and got to sleep.

[???]

I hated myself.

I was slow, and there was nothing about me worth complimenting. I had no hopes for the future, either. I had nothing. But still, that was fine.

...Since even so, I had nothing to worry about.

But when I met you, I felt something change. I didn't gain anything visible to the eye, but I felt like you had given me something. And while I hadn't ever doubted that I had nothing before, I was embarrassed with myself for being that way.

The day I met you, I felt saved by your voice, happily singing from a park bench. I remember that moment clearly.

So I thought, "I want to be a person who can give something to you."

You may have already forgotten that, but I don't mind.

"Really?", the bluebird asked from beside me.

It was a quiet night, with only the rustling of trees. I'd come out to the mansion's garden to talk to the bluebird.

"I sure don't see it that way, myself."

She doesn't see it that way. Why is that? I don't know. Yet...

"As many times as I think it over, deep down, I feel like it's best that it stays this way."

"Huh." She nodded, her blue wings blown by the cold air.

"You... Phil, you think things are best this way. You really think that, huh."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Happiness isn't something that lasts very long," the bluebird mumbled with a lonely, somewhat pained look.

"Are you hurting, perhaps?"

"Me? Yeah, when I look at you guys now, I really hurt inside."

"I mean, I don't."

"Nah, well, I said 'you guys.'"

So, then... not just me?

"Who were you talking about besides me?"

"I meant... hmm. I won't say for now. Since I'm sure you'll figure it out soon."

She made her answer vague with an implication of deep significance. I felt my heart become a little hazy.

Just then, the bluebird suddenly coughed violently. I looked at her with surprise. She slowly lifted her head and gave me a smile. It made my chest ache.

"...I suppose you are the one in the most pain."

"I'm fine. I mean, I was born for this. This is nothing if it's for you, Phil."

Why was the bluebird exhausting herself so for my sake? It was always this way since the day we had our meeting.

The bluebird in the fairy tale gave happiness not to just one person, but many townspeople.

Right now, there were people in town who seemed happy, but about just as many who looked unhappy. Surely it wasn't this way before I met the bluebird.

"I don't suppose that to make someone happy, someone else has to be made unhappy... Surely not, yes?"

I aired a worry to the bluebird. She took a deep breath to calm her breathing.

"My ability doesn't require anything like that. Just... well, I guess you could say this ability can cause both happiness and unhappiness."

"What... do you mean?"

"If you knew what happiness really was... I wonder."

The bluebird stared at something far away. What did she mean by those words?

"Well then... I'm going to bed now. Phil, you need to get Mischa up early again. You better sleep too."

"Ah... right."

On rare occasion, I would come to meet the bluebird at night like this.

The day I first met the bluebird, she told me "I'm nocturnal," so when I wanted to talk, I met her at night. But after a while, she said "It's no problem to meet during the day," and night meetings became infrequent.

Tonight, I had felt like enjoying the night breeze, so I came to the garden. Then she came peeking over the fence, so we talked.

After saying goodbye to the bluebird, I lifted myself up from the brick wall around the flowerbed.

"If you knew what happiness really was... I wonder."

Those words swirled in my chest all the way back to my room.

What would happen, indeed?

Would I be able to keep being happy like this? Or would I perhaps become unhappy?

...I wondered if the bluebird knew what happiness was.

Those words of hers made it difficult for me to fall asleep that night.

[Day Six]

A refreshing morning. A curtain of light slipped through the trees and illuminated my cheeks. As I sat up, the tree trunk I'd been napping against lightly shook.

The usual morning. Nothing changed. Nothing since the day I was born.

Well, maybe I tired a little more easily these days. But that was it. Even if I used up all my power and died, I wouldn't really mind it, myself.

Because that was just my mission, and my destiny, I guess.

"Morning. Nice weather today," I said to some little birds stopped on tree branches and chirping. The birds chirped back, but I had no clue if they were responding to my greeting.

"They call me a bluebird, but I don't really get what you guys are saying."

I don't know too much about who I am. But since Phil, Mischa, the townspeople all called me a bluebird, I must've been that.

What do I know is my power. Phil called it the power to make people happy.

But I begged to differ. I couldn't exactly tell you why I felt that way, but I just doubt a power that can make everyone happy, no buts, exists in this world.

Since happiness to one person isn't necessarily happiness to someone else, that seems pretty obvious.

"I guess I might be coming up to my limit..."

It had been a year and some change since I started using my ability. I had zero confidence I was using it well.

I mean, as far as I could see, as far as I heard, I wasn't using it

well. Laughable, huh? Maybe because I'd only just been born.

"Maybe I got a little too cocky."

Every day, I was using lots of my own energy. Pretty much on full blast all day. Not surprising that I'd start to wear out. I couldn't become the bluebird from the fairy tale.

"Wonder if Efi'll come today?"

The other day, some visitors came to town.

One was Al. I hadn't talked to him in person, but Phil called him that, so that was probably right. The other was Efi. Somehow, she seemed to have the same scent as me. Just intuition.

Efi was bright and silly and just a little stupid, but I had a lot of fun talking with her. And she smiled a lot. The kind of smile a happy-looking person had.

I felt like there were hardly any people left in this town with smiles like that. There were some who smiled a lot, but they were fake smiles.

I wanna talk with Efi. And I wanna see her smile. That's the only time I can have the illusion of being happy myself.

"Efi?" I sensed someone on the other side of the fence.

"Morning."

Someone looked down from the fence connected to the garden and greeted me as usual. But it wasn't Efi greeting me.

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"Got it? You go see Mischa."

"Why?", Efi asked with a tilt of the head.

"Cause that seems safest."

Efi still looked to be not getting it, but said "Got it!" and flew

out of the room. ...Not asking anything complicated, so she should be fine.

“Now then...”

If Efi was to be believed, the bluebird was in that garden where we talked with Phil two days back.

What would I do if she wasn't there...? Well, Efi talked to her in the same place two days in a row, so maybe the bluebird kept coming back there to talk to her.

It wouldn't be Efi today... Would she talk with me?

I'd have to be careful about breaking the ice and all that. ...But did I have time to spare?

While thinking a bunch of things over, I arrived at that spacious garden.

Unfortunately, I didn't see the bluebird anywhere. Couldn't be that easy, could it... I sighed and was about to head back, when...

“Efi?”

“!”

An unfamiliar voice came from over the fence. Looking closer, I saw a little bit of blue hair sticking through the fence. Was this the bluebird?

“Morning.”

I calmly issued a greeting, hiding my impatience. First, I decided to wait for her reply.

A child peeked her face out from behind the fence. “Not Efi, huh. You're Al, aren't you?”

“You know me?”

“I saw you talking with Phil here, that's why.”

The blue-haired child moved her face away from the fence,

then vigorously leapt over it.

The fence was pretty tall, so I panicked for a moment. But she flapped the wings on her back and softly landed on the ground.

“So Efi couldn’t come today.”

“Nope. I’m the one who wants to talk to you today.”

“Huh.” The blue-haired child smirked.

“First, I want to ask something. Are you the bluebird?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” she nodded, not attempting to hide a thing.

While I was thinking about how to proceed with the conversation, she spoke up. “So what do you need with me?” Helped that she was making this quick.

“It’s you. You’re using your power over the whole town.”

With that, the bluebird tilted her head a little.

“...Huh. You already know a bunch, Al.”

“Yep.”

Readily admitting to such a massive truth, she met eyes with me without her smile breaking, as if to say “that’s not all that important.”

Considering her age, it felt off that she had such a distanced outlook... that she was so hard to get a handle on.

“Well, instead of talking, can I make a request of my own?”

I braced myself slightly for this sudden proposition.

“It’s nothing weird... I just want you to save a certain person.”

“Who would that be?”

“You see...”

“...What in the world do you mean?” The bluebird’s unexpected reply honestly disconcerted me.

“Just what it sounds like. What you asked me, and what I’m

about to tell you - with all of that, you should understand too, Al."

Still wearing an meaningful smile, the bluebird began to tell me everything.

"Sending Efi over there was a mistake..."

I hurried to find Mischa. She wasn't in the front hall like I expected, so I had no choice but to search all over the vast mansion. Was Efi meeting with Mischa now?

I had to find her and talk to her now... As my impatience grew, my feet quickened too.

Now at nearly running speed, I was about to turn a corner when I suddenly saw a figure in my blind spot. I attempted to stop, but couldn't halt my momentum and lightly bumped their shoulder.

"Ahh, sorry. I'm in a hurry..."

"Oh, I'm fine. ...What seems to be the matter?"

Phil was standing in front of me.

...What should I do?

For a few seconds, I considered every possibility.

I could continue toward Mischa. But if we were in the worst possible situation I could imagine, I wouldn't have the means to handle it.

Phil seemed like the key to resolving said worst-case scenario. So maybe it would be best to talk to Phil here.

"I was looking for Miss Mischa. She wasn't in the grand hall, so..."

"Mischa... is in her room. She hasn't been well lately. What did you need with her?"

Not well... My spine shivered with bad premonitions.

"Er... Not well how?"

"Hm? Oh, it's not a fever or anything of that sort, but she's had trouble breathing. It seems she couldn't sing yesterday..."

So was that the reason I didn't see her yesterday?

If it had worsened to the point of not singing, the symptoms must have started appearing a few days ago.

"Well... Then we might want to hurry."

"Hm?" Phil's face hardened.

"Let's tell Mischa... about her memory loss."

"Huh?!" Phil showed an expression of pure surprise like I'd never seen before, more suiting his age.

"Do you understand what it is you're saying?"

"I sure do."

"Mischa... Even if you tell her such things, she'll quickly forget! So why let her know something so sad? Why intentionally cause her pain?!"

Phil desperately denied my proposal. He had the right reaction. I'd even promised to him that I'd keep quiet about it.

"But I think Mischa's suffering as she is."

Phil locked up for a moment.

"W-Why would you think that too...?"

"Cause I told him."

Hearing a voice from the back, Phil's gaze left me.

From behind me appeared the bluebird. She told me she too was worried for Mischa and Phil, so I brought her along.

"I've been talking with Mischa, too. And when I told Al about it, he told me that's what we should do."

It seemed the bluebird had been talking with not only Phil, Efi, and the townspeople, but also Mischa periodically. And earlier, she told me all about their conversations.

“So there you go. Any further use of the bluebird’s power will just leave Mischa and the bluebird sad. And the bluebird... even if she isn’t human, she might just die.”

“Not human... That’s obvious, isn’t it? She’s like something out of a fairy tale.”

“Right. That’s it. But technically speaking, this girl isn’t a bluebird or anything.”

“Not a bluebird...?”

Phil seemed to be overwhelmed by all this information, and his mouth simply hung open. Not surprising, having all these truths dropped on him rapid fire. But what he really needed to hear was yet to come.

“...She’s a dragon.”

This made Phil freeze completely. As I suspected, even he didn’t know.

“...A dragon, like Miss Efi...? Where is your proof?”

“First up, the wings. All dragons have horns and wings. There are also these wing-like things coming out near her ears, but I suppose they’re her horns.”

As I explained, Phil’s gaze wandered between the bluebird’s wings and body.

“One doubt I had was, when Efi met the bluebird, she introduced herself as “the bluebird,” and Efi didn’t detect it as a lie. Once we talked about it, though, it made sense.”

“You called me the bluebird back then, so... that’s what I thought I was, too.”

In other words, the bluebird herself hadn’t realized the fact that she was a dragon. This allowed for a situation where she could say something that wasn’t a fact, but it wasn’t a lie, meaning no lie

monster appeared. I figured that out while talking to her earlier.

"Sounds like you're the one who called her "bluebird" from the start. So I can only assume you know all about her birth?"

"..."

Phil listened to my question in silence. He showed no intention of answering.

"I don't suppose you saw her come out of a giant egg that suddenly appeared? 'Cause I saw dragon Efi here be born the exact same way."

Phil's mouth faintly trembled. Sure enough, this bluebird's... dragon's owner was Phil.

"At this rate, you and Mischa will just remain unhappy."

"Y... You know nothing!" Phil exploded into an objection. "How do you think I feel greeting Mischa with "nice to meet you" every three days when she loses her memory?! Holding in my welling emotions, treating her as if I were a stranger... Or even... how I feel for Mischa at such a time..."

"Right, I don't know, because I'm not you. And you don't know anything about me, either."

"Of course I wouldn't!"

"Yep. But more than just me. You don't know Mischa either. Nor the bluebird."

"Huh?" The color of Phil's face changed. "What do you... mean?"

"What do you know about her power?"

Phil glanced over at the bluebird, then back to me.

"...Isn't it the power to make people happy?"

"That's the bluebird in the fairy tale. Like I said before, she's not the bluebird, but a dragon. Dragons have unique abilities. In her

case...”

“The power to show illusions,” said the bluebird.

“Eh...?” Phil weakly uttered.

When I talked to the bluebird, I recalled what Neil told me yesterday and the theory I had put together then.

Before leaving Neil and Brett in town, my final question was “What’s the source of the force covering the town?”, and this was Neil’s answer:

“The power of a dragon is enveloping this town. Of this, I have no doubts.”

That answer matched up with the theory I’d been considering.

So, what precisely were the mysterious phenomena happening in town?

We have the extremely happy and extremely gloomy townspeople, each suspecting the others of being monsters. The gloomy ones claimed they saw dead people, or people who shouldn’t be in town...

Putting together the stories from the gloomy townspeople, I established my first theory: were they only seeing an illusion?

It was unbelievable and questionable in its own right, but since the events were limited to this town, the idea that a force over the town was creating illusions felt most reasonable.

In that case, what about the cheery citizens?

They all seemed perfectly happy, and I heard not a peep about seeing ghosts or anything. Perhaps they were being shown separate illusions, and that’s why they seemed so happy.

I felt like things were lining up, but what I absolutely couldn’t figure out was why the citizens saw different illusions.

After the bluebird made her “request,” I aired this doubt to her. And she had a most unexpected reply.

“...The truth is, it was only supposed to be a little bit around Mischa. The plan was using my power to make “illusionary citizens.” For the sake of Mischa, who had no friends because of her memory loss, I had them visit her every day so she wouldn’t be lonely. Those “cheery townspeople,” as you call them, were all illusions made by me.”

I was deeply shocked when she gave me that answer. After all, she was telling me those very human-like happy people I’d seen were all illusions. I hadn’t noticed in the slightest.

“To be exact, it’s an ability that can give form to people’s memories... I guess. The happy townspeople were created from the memories of the many real residents of this town. I just used those real people as a base for the illusionary ones.”

That would explain why the illusions seemed so realistic, I thought.

“I see. So wouldn’t it be possible to show Mischa the memories sleeping in her mind?”, I asked naively.

If you could summon something up from memory, couldn’t you give form to lost memories which she couldn’t remember herself? If you did that, even though she may forget them, she could recall them again and again.

“My ability won’t work on lost, long-forgotten memories. I can only make an illusion of something someone remembers clearly. If I did try to do it on something deep in their memory, they’d only see something warped unless they could remember it. The extent of my ability is really pretty puny...”

The bluebird had a sorrowful look. I was sure she had tried all

sorts of things, but to no avail.

“What do you want to do, then?”

“Like I said before, help Mischa. I mean, well... I’m making Phil and the townspeople unhappy, too. So I want you to save them, and her.”

“You asked that already. What about you?”

“Huh?” The bluebird tilted her head as if to say, “what *about* me?”

“I could save you too.”

“Huh... How good-natured.”

That was definitely not accurate. I just couldn’t bear to see things get any worse with these guys.

“Using your power any more will just ruin your body, I’m sure. Either get things to a point where you don’t need to anymore, or end up rendering yourself unable to use it anyway. Same result.”

The bluebird lowered her head, striking a thoughtful pose.

“Right... Either way will be the same in the end. All right, I guess I’ll have you save me.”

I nodded. And we left the garden to look for Mischa together.

“Then... the people who came to see Mischa were illusions. What’s more, damage from this has spread beyond this mansion...?”

“Sorry, Phil,” apologized the bluebird. “My bad for not saying so as soon as I realized. I couldn’t control my power well, and I couldn’t say anything... and things slowly dragged on until today.”

“I want to go with you to see Mischa.”

Phil looked like he still couldn’t accept it, and was refusing to cooperate.

“Please... While you’re keeping me here, Mischa’s driving herself further into a corner. Even if it’s too late, I think we can do something with you there. You can save Mischa.”

That seemed to be the key to unlocking Phil’s shackles. He sighed and turned his gaze to me.

“Understood. Mischa’s room is this way.”

Heading further down the hallway where I bumped into Phil, I saw a door.

Phil knocked three times and called through the door. “Mischa, it’s me.”

He waited a while. But even after a long while waiting, we didn’t hear Mischa’s voice.

“Mischa...?”

Usually she would reply right away, I supposed. Phil craned his neck and reached for the doorknob, and suddenly, it opened with a click.

From inside leapt not Mischa, but Efi.

“Ah! You’re here! Um, miss singer’s in a real bad way!”

With that, Efi grabbed my hand and pulled me inside. Sensing Efi really meant it, Phil and the bluebird followed behind us.

“VvvV...”

Something monstrous was sitting on a big white bed, making a beastly moan. It had a human-like shape, but was somehow incomplete, not all one thing. Its expression seemed slightly sorrowful.

“We didn’t make it in time...?”

As I’d predicted, it was the worst-case scenario.

"Efi, how is it?"

"Umm... It'll just keep pouring out like this, so I can't eat it all..."

Indeed, the thing before us was overflowing head to toe with a black mud.

I took a few steps closer, but it only moaned. It showed no sign of attacking us.

"Hold on a moment... What's happened to Mischa...? Did that monster devour her?!", Phil asked in a panic, pointing at the monster spewing mud.

"...Nope. That *is* Mischa."

"!"

Yes, this was Mischa. Though her form had decayed almost beyond recognition.

"Mischa was always lying, too. Because Efi was with her, all the many lies haunting Mischa took on form. And then... they overflowed like crazy, resulting in this."

"Lies...?"

When Efi approaches, lies take form. If it's one or two, you get cute-looking weak monsters like what was wrapped around Phil's foot the other day. Something Efi could easily neutralize and process as food.

But as lies get bigger, they overtake the host, and ultimately swallow them up like this. At that point, even Efi can't eat them.

"You know, Phil, the whole time I was fearing this would happen to you. Every time Mischa lost her memory, you'd been telling her "nice to meet you." But once I heard from the bluebird, I realized Mischa's lies were the real concern."

"What lies are those...?!"

Phil grabbed my collar roughly. He hardly seemed able to control himself from impatience and uneasiness.

"This is one thing even the bluebird didn't seem to notice. Because when you really don't want a lie to be found out, you obviously won't tell anyone else. So... here's my guess."

"Yes...?"

I put it in simple words to make it as easy on Phil as I could.

"Mischa remembers you."

The moment I told him, the energy left his hands.

"What do you... mean by that...?"

"The bluebird's been talking with Mischa often. And you come up a lot, it seems."

"Yeah, Mischa was dying to hear about you. Especially the days she lost her memory," added the bluebird.

Phil made no attempt to hide how lost he was, listening silently while sweat formed on his brow.

"If she really forgot everything about you, she wouldn't do that every time. So your appearance, your name, maybe both... Some part of you, she still remembered clearly even when she would lose her memory."

"Then what need was there to hide it?"

Phil's voice trembled. Because of the secrets they'd kept from each other, Mischa was taken by lies. He was probably starting to realize that himself.

"Same reason as you, I'm sure. She 'didn't want to make you sad'... Because she may remember how you look or your name, but nothing about the times you had together."

Phil gulped.

"She knew you were someone important to her, but didn't

know how you had lived together up to now. You kept introducing yourself anew to her, so she decided it was best to not make you sad.”

“No... Then does that mean Mischa realizes she loses her memories, too?”

“If you only remember a little bit about yourself and your family, of course you’re gonna notice there’s something up. I’m sure Mischa isn’t that stupid.”

Phil bit his lip and lowered his head.

Everything they’d struggled to hide all this time had been for nothing in the end. Not only Phil; you could say it about all three of them.

“We’ll need your words to strip away the lies around Mischa. Tell her everything.”

“What? What would I tell her now...?”, Phil asked in a strained voice of regret. Now that he understood everything, he was full of guilt... or something like it. His expression was sullen.

“Ask your heart. I bet there’s plenty you want to say. Make it as long as you need to. I’m sure your words alone can save Mischa.”

I patted Phil’s back and pushed him over to Mischa, whose silhouette grew hazy from the lies eating at her.

Phil shot me a puzzled look, but after seeing I would say nothing, took a slow deep breath with resolve.

“Mischa.”

*

I hate myself.

I’m losing my memory. It may be because of an illness, or it

may be my fault. Though you will not tell me.

But when you greet me in the morning, I feel myself wrapped up in happiness. I just can't remember what it is you gave me.

When and where did we meet? I remember your face and name, so why can I not remember that?

Maybe you've forgotten me as well? Are we truly meeting for the first time, as you say?

"Why can I not remember...?"

It hurts, deep in my chest. And it's suffocating.

Surely, you treated me preciousely at all times. You were kind to me, I'm sure. You smiled for me, I'm sure.

But as much as I search within myself, I can't find your expression.

It's like I've been thrown into a maze where everything around me is dark.

I can remember my name which I love. The precious name my loving family gave me.

I can remember my family which I love. Their faces and names, and just a little bit of the meals I ate with them.

I can remember the songs which I love. Even if I can't recall the lyrics, I remember the melody.

And I can remember you who I love. Though I know you're important, that's all I know.

Why can't I remember anything but your face and your name?

"Phil..."

I tried saying your name. Though there was no reason why doing it now would clear up the darkness around me.

"...s..."

"Huh?"

I heard someone's voice from far away. Is this a voice I know...?

"Mischa."

This time, I heard it clearly. I know this voice well. It's your precious voice.

"Phil!"

I strove to speak. Lately, I had been feeling sickly, and could not even sing very well, so I was unsure if you could hear it. But I raised my voice and shouted your name.

"There's something I need to apologize for, Mischa."

"I need to apologize for something as well, Phil."

It felt like there was something stuck in my throat. My voice was quieter than usual. But I ignored it, and continued to shout into the darkness.

"I've been lying to you. When your parents went away for work and I was entrusted with you, I felt just a little pressured. I wondered if I would suffice. Even when you hired me at the mansion, I felt my chest was about to burst."

"There's no need to feel that way."

Surely, Father and Mother were fond of Phil. That's why they called him to the mansion. Though I can't remember that day anymore.

"I was told your parents explained your illness to you every morning you lost your memory, so I felt I had to do the same. But the first time I told you, you looked so sorrowful. So I lied. I started saying "nice to meet you" instead."

The days when I went empty, Phil always said "nice to meet you." I didn't understand why he would say such a thing. I was uneasy that he had really forgotten me.

But that wasn't it, was it. He said it for my sake.

But.... but.

"I knew that we were not "meeting," either. But I didn't say it. And I was very sad when I couldn't say it."

"So I want to apologize. I'm sorry, Mischa."

"So am I!"

I had to properly apologize as well. And yet, my throat was filled with some kind of mud, and I couldn't speak the words.

I had to apologize... I had to say it to Phil...

(I want to apologize to Phil!)

As I made that wish, a ray of light came through the darkness.

"It's coming off!"

I heard an adorable voice, and the light grew.

So blinding... But I desperately reached toward that light.

"Mischa!"

I could see Phil's face. And in the next moment, I was being held up in his arms.

"Sorry... I'm really sorry, Mischa..."

Phil apologized with a quivering voice. His body was shaking, too.

"No, so am I. I need to apologize myself."

The things that had built up in me, and dragged me into the darkness...

They had fallen away now. So now, I could say it.

"I did know you, Phil, but I couldn't remember. Even though I knew your face and name, I could remember nothing else. So I thought... if I told you that, it would only make you sad. So I didn't..."

“I see... I see now. That’s fine. I’ve always been unremarkable, after all. Even if you just remember my face and name, if you haven’t forgotten everything about me, that makes me very happy.”

“Phil...!”

As I called his name, tears fell from my eyes.

“I’m sorry...”

I squeezed out one last apology. I wonder if Phil heard it.

After that, the two of us continued to hold each other, and quietly cried together.

[Day Seven]

It was a quieter morning than usual.

Me, Efi, and the bluebird were sitting around a big white table. Having sweets and tea, we were waiting for Phil and Mischa.

“I don’t think I can eat too much...”

“Figures, after eating a lie that big.”

It was large enough to distort a human’s form. I could expect not having to give her a single bite for a week, maybe.

I’d never gone a week without any food myself, so I couldn’t imagine what that felt like. Dragons must have real different stomachs from humans, too.

“Wonder if everyone’s happy now?”, the bluebird murmured with a smile. Unlike yesterday, she had a simple expression.

After the lies were stripped away from Mischa yesterday, the bluebird repealed her power that covered the town.

As she’d told me, most of the “cheery citizens,” as I called them, vanished. There was naturally confusion, but the police went around offering an explanation, and by evening, they seemed to be getting back their usual liveliness. These people could just adapt to anything, I bet.

Phil was worried that Mischa would feel lonely with the people who came to visit her being gone, but Mischa said with a smile that it was enough if Phil would listen to her.

With Mischa’s song and personality, I was sure people would naturally gather around her again. And not illusions this time. At least I thought so.

"I'd say this is better than before. No reason to call you the bluebird anymore, though."

"Yep. My wings only come out when I'm using my power in the first place. I could make them appear anyway, but it wears me out."

"...Yeah, I feel like this town gets me unusually tired too."

When I met Neil in town, he wondered aloud if the power of a dragon covering the town might have an effect on humans.

Then again, maybe it was just the fatigue from dragging Efi around.

"You met the captain and his subordinate, right? What are you gonna do?"

After the case with Mischa was settled, Neil's force evidently came to the mansion. But I wasn't interested in another glare-fest with that Brett guy, so I stayed up in the room with Efi.

"Yeah, but I told him I'm staying here. I love this town and all."

"Hmm. Seems like you'd be safer with them, though."

"I mean, there aren't a lot of bad people in this town. Oh, and there are lots of big trees. I love leaning on tree trunks and sleeping. So this might be a better place for me."

"Hey, what are you talking about?", Efi interrupted.

Here, I had a thought.

The bluebird being a dragon. The illusion-showing power that had covered the town. The police's explanation.

"...You're a dummy, so you should stay out of the conversation."

Explaining all of that in a way Efi would understand seemed like a huge annoyance... downright difficult, even, so I rejected it.

"Whaaa?! Why not, why not?! Tell meee! You're mean, papa!", Efi wailed.

Shoot. Maybe I pressed the wrong button.

“Al is your papa?”

“Yeah! And Al’s name is a lie, too!”, Efi casually revealed to the bluebird. She was being such a blabbermouth, I had to stop her.

“And also... Mmh mmfh!”

“Say any more, and no snacks for the rest of eternity.”

I covered Efi’s mouth to keep her from spilling any more beans. She struggled and made muffled noises through my arm.

“You guys are funny,” the bluebird snickered beside me.

There was nothing funny about it, if you ask me.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

Right on time, I was saved by Mischa and Phil arriving with sweets and tea.

“Are you certain?”, Mischa asked, looking at us lonesomely.

“Yeah, we finished our main objective of gathering info. We gotta get moving somewhere else soon. A traveler’s fate and all that.”

“Is that so... Then we will pray for good fortune on your travels,” Mischa vowed in a clear voice.

“I know we’ve caused you much trouble.” Phil bowed his head low beside her.

“It’s done with now. Don’t sweat it.”

Phil looked at me closely after my blunt reply.

“...Mr. Al, you seem quite different from our first meeting.”

Come to think of it, I was slipping back to my “usual” way of speaking with Phil and the rest. Not a great idea for a con artist to let his true colors be seen, but...

“Well, yesterday called for hurrying. And if you’ve seen it once,

no point in hiding it anymore.”

“But I believe that suits you more, Mr. Al.”

What’s that supposed to mean? Because I’ve got a mean look?

While I worried over it, the bluebird came up to us. “Oh yeah, take this. As proof of our friendship.”

She rustled around her waist, then offered us a handful of blue feathers.

“Pretty!”

“Haha, since you talked with me so much, Efi. I hope we can talk again.”

The bluebird smiled at Efi with a hint of sadness.

“Right... I suppose I can’t call you “the bluebird” anymore. I’ll need to think of a proper name for you,” Phil suddenly mumbled.

True, she wasn’t really a bluebird in any sense, so that could be an issue going forward. Efi was the only one present who didn’t seem to follow, but seemed deep in thought about what name would be good for her.

The bluebird thought for a while, then suddenly looked up.

“Well, Al sounds good.”

“...Why?” I winced with a sort of disgusted surprise.

“It’s a fake name anyway, so why not? Gimme your name, Al...”, she whispered in my ear. Seemed she was being careful not to let the others know.

“Ahh...” I hesitated to reply. It was a pseudonym, but still... why my name?

“Well... sure.”

“Hooray,” the bluebird whispered with a wide smile. Then she turned to Mischa and Phil.

“Since Al saved me, I said I wanted to make my name Al too so

I don't forget. And then Al said I could use it. So from today forth, I'm Al."

So she told them. I was speechless from the feeling that I'd been out-conned.

"Oh? That's wonderful."

"Heehee. That's great, Al."

Phil and Mischa both smiled happily at the bluebird. I had been using that name for the past week, so it gave me a weird ear-burning feeling.

"Will you come to this town again?", Phil asked me.

"Hmm... If I feel like it."

"I wanna hear miss singer sing again!"

Mischa bent down slightly to Efi's eye level. "Oh, I'm so glad. I'll have to practice my singing plenty."

"Well then, excuse us."

At this rate, Efi would only get that much more unwilling to leave town. So I turned around, pulled Efi's hand a little forcefully, and went down the road out of town.

"Bye-bye!"

Before Efi fully turned her back on the town, she waved goodbye to Mischa and the rest.

A quiet "goodbye" came from behind.

"...Hm?"

After walking a ways, I noticed a little flower blooming at my feet.

No... Actually, there were little flowers springing up and blooming along the path we were walking.

It was still a cold season. Too early for flowers to bloom. The

bluebird must have set this up.

So the range of the bluebird's power did extend past the town. That's really far.

...Maybe I should've gotten a little more information.

"Woow!", Efi shouted with amazement at the dreamlike spectacle.

"Must be that bluebird. Guess it's a perfectly good use of that ability."

"She's not the bluebird, she's Al!", Efi reminded me angrily.

"Yeah, yeah, got it. Doubt we'll be stopping by that town again anyway."

"...So we really aren't going there again, huh?" Efi's face went sullen.

"Like I've said before, I can't just come and go to places like I please. You never know who's watching, and you could get stabbed any moment in this line of work. Wouldn't want me to get stabbed, wouldja?"

Efi silently shook her head.

"That's right. The people you build good relationships with are the ones you can't avoid trouble with. So we won't be going back to that town."

"Sniff..."

Efi was a dummy, but she probably more or less got what I was saying. Still, she was pouting hard, not able to fully accept it.

"...If we can clear a bunch of things up... go all around the world, and run out of towns to go to. Then I'll take you there again."

"Really?!"

Eh, it was a lie, of course. But Efi didn't notice my lies, so this

would do.

“Hm?”

Suddenly, my cellphone rang. I answered the call, and the hat informant’s voice leapt into my ears.

“Yoohoo! Done with bluebird hunting?”

“Yeah, with results. Let’s make a trade next time we meet.”

“Whoa-ho! Amazing. That’s our gifted conman. How does Vermilion Town sound next?”

“Vermilion Town?” Hmm... I’d never heard of it. Once this call was over, I’d have to find directions there.

“There’s an interesting legend they’ve got over there. I’m heading there now, so I’ll be waaaiting!”

“Right, got it.”

I hung up, and Efi looked at me as if to ask “who was it?”

“...Our next destination is decided. Vermilion Town.”

“Va...?”, Efi tried to repeat in a dumb voice. Probably didn’t hear me very well. “Are there tasty treats there?”

“That’d be nice.”

...I had to get a lot of money ready for next time. With Efi along, I wouldn’t be surprised if I ran out.

There were still things I couldn’t resolve. First of all, the lie I’d told to my family. That was a lie that still wouldn’t come off.

This journey of ours was more accurately an escape. I was constantly fleeing from place to place.

It was something I’d have to bear my whole life, I was sure.

I don’t feel like asking forgiveness. It’s fine.

“I hope I can eat your lies too someday, papa.”

“Don’t call me papa,” I retorted, and Efi let out a quiet “gack!”

...Efi, eating my lies. Would a day like that come, I wonder?

If it did, that might be the day I'm saved. ...Now, I'd come to have silly thoughts like that. Strange as it was to put any hopes in this little dummy.

"I'll do my best to stay with you forever, papa!"

"Really now?"

Ever since our shocking meeting, I was constantly getting pushed around by this brat.

But.

...For now, maybe I was happy being pushed around like this for a while.

Efina's Investigation

< Extra I >

This isn't a lie. This... probably isn't a lie.

Papa's lies... Oh, don't tell him I called him papa. Or he'll flick my forehead!

Anyway, I really couldn't tell papa's lies. When other people lied, this monster-y thing came out, and I chowed down on it. Munch! But they didn't come out for papa. I wonder why?

I got curious and asked him once.

"Why don't your lies make monsters, papa?"

"Listen, Efi. If your lies don't get found out, they're not lies."

Hmm... complicated. But papa told me that I was a dummy, so I didn't have to understand. Wow, papa is so nice!

Oh yeah, I didn't introduce myself. I'm Efina. A dragon! I have the power to eat lies.

I love sweet candy! But sweets don't make my tummy full. But I love them, so I eat 'em!

I first met papa as soon I was born. He said I was born right out of an egg.

And then papa gave Efina her name. Come to think of it, what was papa's real name? It was always a fake name, so I didn't know.

When I was born, even I didn't know what abilities I had or anything. It seems like other dragons know for themselves, though. Must be 'cause I'm a dummy! Yeah, like papa said!

Since I didn't know what I could do, for then, I decided to stay close to papa.

At the first town we went to, the first person he met, papa introduced himself as a "merchant," I think. And his name then

was... Greed? I think.

After that, the other person showed him an inn, and we stayed there.

Then he said it was time for “investigation,” and we went talking to a bunch of people. Oh, since this town was small, he let me come along!

Then, when we were talking to this one person, pop! A monster appeared! And they were surprised! Papa was surprised! Efina was surprised!

Nobody knew what was what! It was a real mess!

Anyway, I poked the monster to try and figure out what it was. It squeaked and shook.

“What should I do?”, I pondered. ‘Cause I really had no idea at the time.

“Eat it,” papa said.

Huh? Is this edible? Fearfully, I picked up the monster and bit one of the ends.

“Tasty!”

It was tasty. So this was something I could eat...

“I’m still not clear on what that thing is... but one thing’s clear to me.”

Papa turned to the person he was talking to.

“You just lied.”

A bunch of stuff happened after that, but monsters appeared later too, and papa told me they were monsters that appeared when people lied.

So I was a dragon who could eat lies. The lie-eating dragon! Sounds kinda cool.

But it was kind of strange how I couldn't eat papa's lies. Even though he was telling so many. Did he have some secret?

...If you don't know, you gotta investigate it! So I decided I would investigate papa for a while.

I knew all about investigations, since papa always did them. ...Oh, I gotta take good notes. Or I'll forget stuff.

Earlier, papa gave me a notepad and pencil he said he got as a bonus for buying something. Okay, I'm all set!

Papa didn't have a home that stayed in one place like other people. And he didn't have a car. So he would stay at other people's places, and borrowed stuff.

When I asked if borrowing was the same as stealing, papa said he was just loaning it. But then again, when he talked to people who had cars, I saw him sneakily take the keys. And I never saw him give them back later!

When heading for the next town, if it would take more than a day to get there, sometimes we would sleep outside. When we did that, we got food from places nearby.

I went and got berries and bunnies for him sometimes. Sometimes he ate grass, too.

It was all stuff I couldn't eat, but papa ate anything. Papa was amazing. Sometimes he ruined his tummy, though.

"Can you not eat lies, papa?"

"If I could, I wouldn't be eating this junk," papa said a little sadly, since his tummy was upset.

Seemed like papa couldn't eat lies. Dragons and humans were different, I guess, but how different? I was a little curious.

A different day. This time, I tried investigating different stuff.

Papa had a mean glare. And he had a cut on his left cheek. He told me he got scratched by a cat a long time ago, but I wondered if it was true?

Also, he usually wore clothes that covered up his mouth, and gloves too. The mouth was apparently helpful if he “wasn’t vigilant enough,” and he said gloves were nice to not leave “fingerprints.”

Are you not allowed to leave fingerprints? What are fingerprints, anyway?

He bought new clothes every time we went to a new town. Apparently wearing clothes that matched the town’s style made people open their hearts. He said even though it cost money, nothing was better to have than people’s trust.

Thinking about it, if a strange guy in strange clothes came up and talked to me, even I might get kinda worried.

Also, when he took his clothes off to change, there were these stitches on his tummy. What were those? A fashion statement? I never got to ask, so I didn’t know.

Next time he changed, I’d have to ask. But papa always gets up earlier than me, so I never see him get dressed.

Come to think of it, he’d change his hair or even his eye color too. I asked about that some other day.

He said he dyed his hair or wore wigs. But wigs cost money, so he dyed it most of the time. He’d make it blue, or make it green. Very colorful!

He told me there was some item that let him change his eye color. “Contacts,” I think? I told him, I wanna wear them too!, but he said no.

And he said I couldn’t dye my hair, either. I guess hair could get

damaged. Does your hair say “ouch!” or something?

What hair and what eyes did papa really have? I decided to ask him.

“What’s the real papa?”

“...Talk about a philosophical question. And don’t call me papa.”

The first time didn’t seem like it was enough.

“Your hair and your eye color’s always different. What hair and eyes do you really have?”

This time I said it right. Papa went “ahh...”, then answered.

“Right... My hair color’s about the same as yours. And blue eyes.”

The same hair color as me, and blue eyes. I hadn’t ever seen papa looking like that yet. Would I see it someday?

“Hey, you actually answered that question!”

“Doesn’t matter if I tell you that sort of thing. And you’d keep pestering me if I didn’t.”

Was I questioning him that much? Oh well. I’d gotten another piece of info on papa!

My investigation into papa went on, and there were still lots of things I didn’t know.

First, papa’s job. Papa said his job was “con artist.”

What kind of job was it? He said it was a job people shouldn’t really do. A job about lying.

That’s why when he first greeted people in a new town, he’d turn into a doctor, or a lawyer, or a traveler. And so far, I’d never seen those lies get found out.

“‘Cause I study the basics,” papa said.

Apparently unless you have that kind of job, you're not supposed to lie. Or else you'll get found out.

And also, papa was really good at finding people's lies. I guess since he was good at telling them too?

Hm, what were papa's likes and dislikes? I had no clue. That's probably something he can safely tell me. So I tried asking.

"What do you like, papa?"

"Beer, money, and women."

That was fast.

"Is beer yummy?"

"It's not a food, it's a drink. Anyway, you shouldn't drink it. You have to get bigger before you're allowed to."

Then he brought the cup in his hand to his mouth. Was he drinking beer now?

"I'm already big!"

"You're just a runt."

"No I'm not!"

I'd gotten a little bigger than before. ...A little. Probably.

"Wonder how dragons handle alcohol...?" Papa seemed to wonder to himself.

"So you like money too?"

"Well, you can do most things if you've got a lot of it."

Money's an important thing you need to live in this world. So if you had money, you could eat a bunch of sweets, and get a lot of stuff bought for you.

"I love money too!"

"A-Ah. ...Sounds indecent coming from you," papa scowled.

"What's 'indecent'?"

My words made papa scowl even more.

"No, never mind. It's not a bad thing to love money."

Hmm. I'd have to look into "indecent" later.

"So, why do you like women?"

"Why...?"

He looked even more troubled than before. Was the reason that complicated?

"I think most men like 'em."

Hmm. Was that how it was?

"Really?"

"Yeah."

If papa said it was true, then it was true. Unless it was a lie?

"I love sweet things!"

"I know."

It felt unfair only knowing papa's favorite things, so I told him mine, but he seemed to know already.

"I love them, so I want to eat a lot of them!"

"Nope," papa said in a low voice right as I finished talking.

"Why nooot?!" You should always have lots of the things you like!"

"Listen, it's not a bad thing to like anything. But you can't drown yourself in stuff you like. Be it beer, or money, or women, or sweets."

Hmmm...?

"So how much should I like them?"

"About one a day."

Huh... That seemed kinda unsatisfying.

"Well, I'll put up with it! So I don't drown!"

"Right."

What papa was saying was kind of tough to process. Would I get it with a little more investigation?

“Okay!”

For the time being, I’d finishing writing down what I’d investigated today.

“Hmm... I tried hard, but I still don’t really get papa.”

Looking over everything I wrote, there were still lots of blank pages. Still lots of investigation to be done.

In fact, I felt like I didn’t understand myself that well either. What are dragons, anyway? And I’d never met any dragons except myself.

Would I someday? What “abilities” did other dragons have?

“What’re you doing, Efi?” Papa came back from the bath.

Oh no! This investigation was a secret, so I couldn’t be found out!

“Nothing at all!”

I hurried to hide my notes under the pillow. They’d never be found there.

“Oh yeah? Get to bed soon.”

See? Totally secret. I’m pretty capable, huh!

“Good night!”

“Yeah, night.”

Every time I learned something new about papa, I got a little happier.

Tomorrow, I think I’ll keep at it with investigating. Hi-hi-ho!

“...What the heck?”

While Efi slept, I gently pulled out the thing she hid under her pillow. It was a notebook I’d given her one day.

“Gah, her writing’s so sloppy.”

Then again, I never recalled teaching Efi to write.

She was able to speak to some extent from the day she was born, but to think she could read and write...?

“No... Guess she was just “pretending” to write.”

I went through the pages, but couldn’t identify a single letter that looked correct. It was just scribbles.

“Oh well...” I closed the notebook and gently turned the pillow without waking Efi. Then I carefully put it back in place, getting the exact angle and position.

It occurred to me that I probably didn’t need to go this far when it was Efi I was dealing with, but she was sharp in the strangest ways.

“I still don’t get it...” I sighed.

It had been a while since Efi’s birth, but there were still many mysteries about dragons to me.

I’ll just stay observant, I suppose. Dragons are rare, highly-valued creatures. I need to treat her with care.

...And I mean, I never know what she’ll get up to when I take my eyes off her.

After looking at Efi’s face for a while, I went back to my bed. And just like that, I fell asleep.

Certain Dragon's Memorandums

< Extra II >

In this world, with the exception of animals and the like, there currently exist two general races. Humans and dragons.

Evidently, humans were once divided into smaller race categories like “beastmen” and “fairies,” but have now come to all refer to themselves as human.

As for dragons... When we appeared, why dragons as a whole are born, and why we appear only near people - even as a dragon myself, I do not know.

Now, a late introduction. My name is Neil Masefield. As stated, I am a dragon. And I serve as the captain of the police force.

Our force is an organization that secures peace in towns. It might be easiest to think of us as “fighting police.”

The captain who preceded me was my parent. A strong, sturdy woman. Though she’s no longer with us.

Ah, I rather set a gloomy mood there. Apologies. Don’t take it too mournfully. After all, humans and dragons have different lifespans.

...Yes, while I’m at it, I suppose I should record what dragons are, and how we live.

Having lived for over a hundred years, this may end up being a “long story” of such length that only creatures of my age could boast. Indeed, the children did say to me before, “mister, your stories are so long.” I’ve been trying to work on it.

Well... Ultimately, even I would like to briefly summarize this present situation. If you simply gloss over it, I won’t mind.

First, a word about dragons. Dragons are born with an assortment of abilities.

For instance, I have the power of immortality. Even if dealt a

blow of instant death, I can recover with time. It remains unexplained why and with what purpose dragons are born with their abilities.

However, I have a suspicion that dragons are “born from people’s wishes.” This theory is one that I was told by a certain woman.

Specifically, the aforementioned prior captain of the force. Her name was Emilia.

Emilia was simply powerful. More heroic than any common man, and rather skilled with a sword, she was a popular person. Most likely explaining why she served as the captain.

When I was born, Emilia was surprised, yet immediately looked as if she suspected something. Perhaps at the time, Emilia already knew why I had been born.

In addition to unique abilities, some dragons are born with additional minor powers like breathing fire and controlling wind. I had nothing in particular, but strictly speaking, perhaps I was more physically strong than other humans or even dragons. I suspected that from day one, when I bent a spoon trying to eat with it.

Afterward, I learned many things from Emilia. How to handle a sword, and the work of the police. As well as how dragons like myself were treated.

She said that she wanted to save everyone. Her eyes quietly glittering like containing the light of sunset left an impression on me that remains to this day.

A few years after beginning to live with Emilia, I asked her something: Why was I born?

I don’t know why I asked such a question of her. But a slight shadow fell over her face, she opened her mouth, and began to

answer as such.

“I think you were born to grant my wish. In fact, perhaps the same is true of all dragons.”

Then, she began to explain what she meant. Going into treacherous places was not uncommon in this line of work. As such, the loss of life... was also not uncommon.

When companions she had just talked with, shared smiles with, suddenly disappeared... It was so heartbreaking to Emilia, who felt for her allies more than anyone, that it nearly equaled the pain of being shot in the chest herself.

Yet for years, she never once showed any sign of it. As strong as she was regarded, she had that weakness as well.

Was I born with such a power to support her just the slightest bit? Many unclear things became clear then.

“You’re the only one I’d show such a face to,” Emilia said, showing me a look of weakness for the first time.

Perhaps that was the first time I sensed her humanity. After that, Emilia came to occasionally show weakness before me.

...And so. Here is my thinking on that theory. As far as I know from talking with the dragons in our care, I believe it holds strong.

Ah, I mentioned earlier that I’d lived over a hundred years. Indeed, the lifespans of dragons far exceed those of humans. If a human lifespan is one hundred years, it’s said a dragon’s is two hundred.

I don’t know why dragons can live for doubly long as humans. Furthermore, while dragons resemble humans, they have no reproductive organs, making breeding impossible. That is one reason why dragons are so valued.

However, I have heard that if all obstacles that would shorten a human's lifespan were removed, they could live to be two hundred. So maybe that is where our lifespan was determined. Though I'd never seen a human who lived that long.

Thus, it was generally the human who sooner or later had to depart before the dragon did. I already knew that before Emilia's time came, so I was prepared.

...Though I was prepared, indeed, losing a person I had a deep connection to, the one I was closest to, left me with an indescribable sense of loss.

Pain does not exist for me. Even so, at that time, I felt like I hurt somewhere for the first time. Emilia must have experienced this many times.

I believe I would have died after only a few times. To have endured this and shown not a peep of it to her subordinates, she truly was a sturdy woman.

...Come to think of it, that man who changes name and face every time we meet has had a dragon with him lately. That was a fact I learned when we reunited in Vermilion Town.

A dragon who feeds on lies. Though I only saw her at a distance, her body did seem to be feminine. As stated, dragons have no reproductive organs. Thus, that was judged based on things like voice and body shape.

A slender body type could make it difficult to determine. That dragon calling itself the bluebird was such an example. I wonder what that one recognized themselves as.

Though I've written quite a bit about it, in truth, it's not much of a concern. When living as a dragon, there's no need to trouble

yourself about it.

What of not living as a dragon, though? In other words, to live among humans. I'll discuss that case a bit more later.

For now, let's return to the activities of the police force. We resolve incidents in towns, and also take dragons into our custody.

Dragons, even after the unification of various races as "human," are rare enough to be distinguished and treated separately. It seems some lands even regard them as gods.

As a result, wrongdoers also have their eyes on us. God, it seems, is even-handed, and will even send a dragon egg in response to the wishes of such sorts.

Even when that doesn't happen, it's not rare that there's robbery and extortion, even going as far to kill a dragon's master. As for what happens to the stolen dragon then, it can be used for all manner of wrong purposes - like being sold for a high price on the black market, or traded like a slave.

We make it our duty to retrieve and protect dragons from such fellows.

We educate the dragons in our care up to a certain level of maturity, and then have them make their own decision.

Will you live as a dragon, or as a human?

First, we'll talk about living as a dragon.

Generally, this means joining the force. Because wherever else a dragon goes, they're only going to be targeted again. Of course, the dragons in our care have all been treated terribly by humans, so hardly anyone would consider living as a dragon somewhere else.

Next, the choice of living as a human.

In this case, we provide support for things like altering records,

and clear up as many doubts and worries as we can before sending them off.

It's difficult to determine if someone is a dragon from appearances alone. Their ears are pointed, but some human races have such features. Some get kidnapped while fumbling around, but if you don't use your powers, you generally won't be identified as a dragon.

What if you do use your powers? Our most distinguishing characteristics are the wings and horns that appear when we do.

With control over your abilities, you can extend and retract your wings and horns even without using powers. With practice, you can also fly with your wings.

While a handy ability, it's as dangerous as you'd expect for swimming through the air and loudly proclaiming "I'm a dragon." So a dragon living as a human is strictly forbidden from using their powers.

Also, you can't marry a human. Though there are cases where two dragons who know what's going on can be wedded, continuing to act as humans.

It may sound restrictive when written out like this, but in reality, many of them live leisurely lives without lacking freedom. Most dragons who choose to live as humans are introverted types opposed to conflict and aren't likely to start up trouble.

...So, that is how I feel about the destination of dragons kept in our care.

Meanwhile, there are also dragons who blend into human society without us taking custody at all.

I speak of cases like Efina, the dragon accompanying that con

artist Teobaldo Leonhearts. She fits the pattern of a dragon acting alongside their master.

This happens especially often when someone is living quietly in a place distant from any big towns, allowing them to live safely out of sight.

In addition, like the child called the bluebird, it's possible to live without others being cognizant of you being a dragon. Or the master's owner can request us to take them. Regarding the latter: it's common for newly-born dragons to have trouble controlling their power and leave their horns and wings out. This puts them at risk of being targeted, perhaps even by their own master.

In the case of that swindler, he's rather powerful, so he seems capable of embarking on such a high-risk journey with a young dragon. Though his worries must be immeasurable.

"Captain, what are you doing?"

My hand stopped as I was suddenly spoken to. I looked up to see Brett standing there.

"Ah, I just thought I'd write a sort of journal. I seem to be somewhat forgetful lately."

"I suspect it may be from the number of times you've died..."

He looked at me with worry. It had taken some time for Brett to show me this kind of concern. I felt sentimental recalling how he used to be before.

"Don't you suppose you should handle less cases personally, captain? I'm worried for your health."

"That doesn't sound like something you'd say to an immortal dragon."

"Technically, your immortality is only healing external wounds.

There's still aging and the like."

Yes, Brett was right. My ability quickly healed wounds, returning me to the state I was in before. People called me an immortal dragon, but I would die like anyone after long enough.

Even the way dragons aged was a little different from humans. Our actual age and our appearance essentially didn't line up.

"Er, captain. You've been writing and writing... Are journal entries meant to be that long?"

My hand stopped at Brett's remark. Indeed, I felt like this wasn't a journal. Thinking further, I felt like I hadn't set out to write a journal, either.

"True... Perhaps it's not a journal. Maybe biography would be more accurate."

That also felt inaccurate, but it was closer than "journal."

"How about you write something, Brett?"

"My life isn't worth crap, sir," Brett said humbly.

...On occasion, he used rough language I wasn't sure where he learned. I didn't recall using such language after taking him in, so surely it was the influence of his master.

"If you write down your disgraces, it should show how you vow not to walk that same path again."

After I told him that, Brett thought, and nodded about thirty seconds later.

"All right, I see what you mean. Where should I write?"

"Just use my notebook. There are plenty of pages left."

"...If I continue on from your biography, captain, it's not your biography anymore, is it?"

I supposed he was right. Well, details.

"It's not my biography. It's a biography of dragons. So perhaps

it should record our various ways of life?”

“Aha... That’s our captain.”

I was rather making things up as I went along, but Brett nodded with awe. It was good that he’d changed from how he used to be, but maybe he trusted me too much.

“How much should I write?”

“Hm? As much as you can and want to. You can read my part and refer to it. What you’re going to write will be like a snapshot of your present self.”

I stood up from the chair and motioned for Brett to sit. He hesitated, likely because it was a chair I always used, but he finally sat down and faced the notebook on the desk.

He flipped through the pages. Brett was a fast reader. Did he read a great number of books? Hm... maybe it was just his youth.

Then, taking out his right hand, he took the pen.

*

My name is Brett. Brett Graves.

Honestly, I went along with the captain’s words and took the pen, but I don’t know what I should record. I’ve never faced a piece of paper like this outside of work documents.

I guess it’s because my life is just that gloomy and stagnant.

Oh, right. First, I guess I’ll explain my name. This name was given to me by Captain Neil, the current captain of our force.

I’ve never asked him directly where it came from, but now that I think about it, it may be because our meeting was in a graveyard. I’ll write about that meeting.

It was about ten years ago now. A few years before I met the captain, I was born.

It irritates me to call him my master, but I'll refer to him as such for convenience. My master was part of a certain gang. I remember that all members of the gang had a red spider mark somewhere on their body to prove their membership.

You can guess the rest. If you read the captain's notes, it should give you the general idea. I might have been considered somewhat different from a slave; I was treated like an attraction.

I'm referred to as a "shadow dragon." To give more details, I can pass through objects like a shadow, and even freely move around any objects that I'm able to hold.

Considering this ability, my master's wish was probably for a helpful spy or a route for smuggling.

I couldn't afford to think about such things back then, but I had a gut instinct that I couldn't show my ability to these people. So from birth, I kept my mouth shut.

Luckily, I wasn't the sort of dragon who fed on a special thing, so I had no issues with hunger or thirst. I could live a long time without food or drink.

As a result, my master was displeased with things not going his way and would whip me, or shoot me somewhere non-fatal. He used every method he could to make me speak and use my ability. Some of the scars still remain.

Why did I not resist after all that? The captain already wrote about this, but... A newborn dragon is unable to control their power.

If I were to run amok with this ability, I didn't even know where I would be sent. If I ended up buried underground, say, I

would surely die, not having an ability like the captain's.

So I vigilantly waited until I was fully about to control my abilities. Until I could tear through the throats of those who looked at me and laughed cockily.

A few years after I was born, I practiced using my ability while they weren't looking. And I felt convinced I could use it perfectly.

It happened in a flash, when they were all gathered together. First, I used my ability to quickly escape my shackles and cell. Then, while they were frozen from surprise, I grabbed their legs and dragged them into the earth.

However, there was a limit on how many I could drag at once. At the time, I was limited to using it on five people simultaneously.

For the rest, I used their weapons. I knew how to use them well, as they showed me how they worked at close range daily.

Though it was my first time actually using them, I think the real reason I had trouble was hesitation.

Just aim and pull the trigger. Or else, just pierce the blade through; they were extremely simple weapons. And I should have known nothing of hesitation.

It probably all happened in less than three minutes. At first, there were a few dozen humans around me. Now, not a single human was left standing.

...No humans. Instead, there was a dragon standing in front of me.

I had never seen any humans outside of the gang. But it was possible they were using other dragons for their business.

I realized he was a dragon by instinct, without having to be told anything. I think fellow dragons are able to recognize each other by instinct.

He wore stiff clothes, and looked at me with an even stiffer expression.

That was my first meeting with the captain.

Thinking back on it makes me feel resentful toward my past self, but the instant the captain stepped toward me, I was already prepared to attack.

I believe I shot a bullet near his heart, and threw knives at him in many places. But he never stopped walking toward me.

Once he got closer to me, I was surprised at his size. I was young, yes, but the captain is very tall, and rather overpowering as a result.

That might have been the first time I felt fear. I tried to throw the remaining knives I had, not even caring if they grazed or injured me. But before the knives reached him, he used his large arm as a shield to absorb them, and arrived in front of me.

“I won’t die, so don’t worry about it. And I’m not going to hurt you.”

I had no weapons left near me. But he was in position to drag him down with my shadow.

“I don’t think much of my death, either. But to see someone who isn’t me die, such as you, is a painful thing.”

...But I couldn’t do it. Maybe because there was still something left in me.

“You shouldn’t fear me so much as to injure yourself. I just came to grab your hands. That’s all.”

With that, he took my hands and held them gently. His hands were fairly large, almost covering up mine.

“My master taught me this. Even if you speak different languages, or are different races, or the other puts up walls... By

doing this, you can connect with each other.”

He had a soft expression.

His words made me tremble. Not from fear or respect. Something brimming from deep in my heart was resonating with my body. Maybe I recognized this person as a god of some sort. In fact, that didn't seem like it was entirely

“...Isn't this a bit exaggerated?”

“Is it?”, I responded, stopping. I didn't have any such intention...

“I don't remember anything like that. True, I said that line, and took your hands, but I don't believe I was treated like a saint or anything...”

“This is how it felt from my perspective, sir.”

The captain twisted his neck. Perhaps it indicated he was searching his memory to determine if he'd just forgotten.

“...It wasn't until a little later when you opened your heart to me. Wasn't it?”

He was right; my writings could be interpreted as, at this point, already looking up to and willingly going with him. Though if you ask me, I was already charmed by something about him at the time...

“Once I took you back, you wouldn't talk for a while, and you used your power to stay away from the others. And I feel like you were itching to outright kill humans.”

“I did open my heart to you, captain.”

“Right... Maybe it was just the other areas that had high hurdles. Even then, it's not as if you spoke to me easily.”

“I am a tight-lipped sort.”

...I felt like that wasn't the right use of those words. But it

didn't change the fact that I looked at the captain in a special way from the first day I arrived here.

I was just poor at showing my emotions then, is all.

"But now that I've written that, there's not much else to write about."

"Nothing?"

"If you want me to write my opinion of that insolent con artist, I could fill a few more pages."

The captain was silent for a while. I heard birds chirping, and just as they went silent, he opened his mouth again.

"No, let's not."

"Huh? Captain Neil, and Vice-Captain Brett! What is going on here?!"

After relaxing for a little while, suddenly, a bright, bouncy voice came from behind us. We turned around and saw a dragon looking at us, with golden hair in a unique shape split in two and slightly-drooping sapphire eyes.

Her name was Iris. She was still an apprentice, but her ability made her fairly handy. There was even talk of making a new unit which was to be headed by her.

"Ah! I've got it! You're sorting through documents... No, wait, those aren't documents on the desk, and you should be nearly done with documents by this time... Ahh!"

As Iris yelped, there was a quiet rumble. I wasn't sure how she tripped when there was nothing there, but Iris was crouched on the floor.

...It seemed Iris was easily flustered, or too thoughtless, leading to a lot of situations like these. Which was quite a shame.

The captain's hesitation to officially start the new unit was likely out of worry for that fact. So I thought as I watched the books and dust kicked up into the air.

"...Are you okay, Iris?"

Stooping over slightly, the captain extended a hand to Iris. She took it with a shy and embarrassed face.

"Huh... That isn't a document, is it? What is it?"

"This is... What did you say? A dragon... biography?"

Thinking about it, was it not something different from a biography? That question began to grow larger in my mind. Isn't a biography written about one person's entire life?

"Maybe?"

Even the captain who dubbed it such had only that to say. Well, perhaps it wasn't that important.

"Ooh! I want to write in this, uh, biography too!" Iris flipped through the pages with great interest.

"Right... I have nothing left to write. What say you, captain?"

"The more pages filled, the more information recorded. I think it's fine."

With the captain's approval, I got out of the chair. Iris quickly sat down and took the pen.

*

My name is Iris Ashbery! Err... My master was an old man named Franz. A normal old man! Oh, he's dead now.

My ability is! The ability to analyze anything I see! My master had a desire to know in detail what many things were, so maybe that's why I have this power?

Let's see... I feel like Captain Neil and Vice-Captain Brett wrote most everything already. Umm... Ah! That's right! I'm a female-shaped dragon. The uniform I wear is also a lady's uniform!

It seems like female police are fairly rare. However, that's mostly limited to humans. Dragons, though it varies, are generally sturdier than humans, so male or female doesn't make much of a difference there.

There are humans in our ranks, but I want to say I heard there were "less than before." Perhaps the reason is that we're gaining more dragons?

The task of taking dragons into our custody seems to have been done before Captain Neil became captain. The previous captain was a human woman, I believe? I've only been alive a few years, so I never met her.

Back in the previous captain's day, it seems taking in dragons wasn't our main objective. Once Captain Neil became captain, we started to do active work in that area, and the number of dragons in our care increased dramatically. About half of those dragons had been traumatized or injured by humans.

When such dragons become members of the force, let's just say there's a strained atmosphere! The human members can get rather fed up with the clear hate they display, so a number have quit. I suppose that can't be helped.

Captain Neil tells me that the previous captain probably suspected things would be this way, and thus tended to neglect the task of taking dragons in. Since she is no longer with us, I suppose we'll never know for sure.

Oh, but I don't detest humans at all! I was never attacked by them or anything, and my master died of natural causes.

Does this kind of thing make me an irregular? Wait, is that not right?

So, I know that there are good humans too. Master Neil even said with gratitude, “I hope we get more dragons like you, Iris.” Heehee! Isn’t that enviable?

“Who are you bragging to?”

“Well! The people reading this biography, obviously!”

Vice-Captain Brett smiled wryly at me.

“...Would there be someone besides us reading?”

“That is... a secret! Now let me write the rest!”

Thus, I have no hate for humans. And I highly welcome Captain Neil’s goal of humans and dragons coexisting! Captain Neil truly is wonderful!

Many of the dragon children we care for respect Captain Neil. He does play with them outside of work and gives them gifts, too.

And Vice-Captain Brett is also strong and cool! However, he does suddenly pop out from floors and walls, so he is regarded as kind of a horrific figure by the children.

“...You’re making me sound like a mushroom,” Vice-Captain Brett remarked, looking over my writing.

“Mushrooms don’t scare people!”

“No, I didn’t mean that part...”

While Vice-Captain Brett was trying to say something, Captain Neil also poked his head out.

“Brett, you really should refrain from using your ability in our lodging space, shouldn’t you? I’m sure it tires you, it scares

children... Nothing good comes of it.”

Captain Neil’s remarks gave Vice-Captain Brett a troubled look. He shrugged his shoulders and opened his mouth.

“It’s a kind of habit. I’ve always done it. And slipping through obstacles is pretty convenient when I’m in a hurry.”

“I see...”

Was he swayed by that explanation? Indeed, these two had a bond of trust where they didn’t need to say a word. I aspire to that!

“Not writing any more?”, Captain Neil asked.

I folded my arms and twisted my head, but there was really nothing else of note.

“I know! What if I wrote about my deep respect for Captain Neil and Vice-Captain Brett? I could fill dozens of pages!”

After my answer to Captain Neil’s question, there was silence for a while.

I heard children playing outside the window, and as they grew distant, Captain Neil opened his mouth again.

“No, let’s not.”

*

...Though today was a workless day, it was as busy as any other.

When I told Brett he would serve as vice-captain, he was greatly surprised, and even humbly suggested that I should refrain. Yet now, he was serving his post wonderfully.

Iris, too, was dependable despite being an apprentice. At worst, I suspected there might be minor hardships with her personality and actions.

I flipped through the pages of the filled-up notebook. As one could tell from reading these memorandums, dragons all had different perspectives, and even emotions.

Why did God make us so similar to humans, I wonder?

Maybe by the time that answer came to light, I wouldn't be alive.

"Ah! Captain Neil, you were thinking about something solemn, weren't you!"

Iris spoke while sipping on hot cocoa. Probably because it was freshly-poured and hot, she stuck her tongue in several times, and making a grimace, went on.

"Captain Neil, if reincarnation existed, would you want to be born as a human? Or as a dragon again?"

"Are insects or animals not an option?", Brett sharply pointed out.

Indeed, if reincarnation did exist, the possibility of it being restricted to those two choices out of all lifeforms did seem low.

"Let's see..."

How would I answer that? Despite having lived for over a century, I'd had no experiences that would have given me a clear answer.

After some thought, one answer did arise.

"If it were down to those two, then such that neither answer would be the better one... That's the kind of world I'll strive to make before my life is exhausted."

It was a vague answer, and perhaps not one that suited the question, but Iris seemed moved by my words. Her eyes sparkled, and she gave me a look of envy.

"Way to go, Captain Neil! Guiding me to an answer I never

would've dreamt up myself! I'm incredibly envious of your vast outlook! Long live Captain Neil!"

"The captain truly is a wonderful man," Brett appended to Iris's words of praise.

Maybe there was a need for me to reevaluate these kid's attitudes.

"Yaaah!"

"Iris, you knocked over a stack of books again! I just restacked those earlier..."

Iris weakly apologized to Brett as she rubbed her bottom.

...Maybe by letting them live freely like this, the days would be more stimulating. In which case, it would be fine to leave it this way.

I picked up my cup of coffee and took a sip.

*

...Oh, are you watching? You're watching! Even if you're not watching, I'm going to proceed assuming you are! Hello, it's Iris!

Some time passed since then, and I've become the captain of a unit called the Special Investigative Division.

The Investigative Division mainly focuses on investigation and cases in which fighting isn't necessary! I'm able to use my ability to its full potential.

At any rate, this biography of ours...? Is this... a biography? Or maybe a memorandum?

Oh well. Writing logs has become kind of a thing among the dragons in the force. Though it's pretty much like daily journaling now!

Because of that, we've crossed the threshold of ten notebooks. When Captain Neil and Vice-Captain Brett initially filled the first-generation notebook, they had no idea it would go on for this long.

I'm feeling a bit gloomy now. You can't go back to times passed! You have to look toward the future! Oh, that's something Vice-Captain Brett said.

Soon, it'll be the tenth year since I was born. I forgot to mention, but dragons don't usually talk about their "age," but "how many years"!

This originates in the fact that a dragon's appearance and the time they've lived can't be compared. For instance, Captain Neil is a gentleman who in human terms might be said to be about thirty, but when you're told he's kept that appearance for over a hundred years, that's a little startling, isn't it?

Dragons will understand what you mean regardless, but you have to do it with humans. If you don't use this phrasing of "how many years," you'll startle people because of the differing ways of tracking years, and you don't want to do that.

Then again, is there a problem with startling people? Can people die from shock?

Oh, looks like this first page is getting filled up quick.

Things have been busy lately, so I've been unable to write, so now I'll write everything at once! The dates, times, and contents sort of blur together, so there may be mistakes, but please forgive it and consider it part of the charm.

[◇/△]

Work again today. This time, even a few members from the Special Investigative Division accompanied Captain Neil for a murder case.

Astoundingly, there were several corpses being found every week, and this had been going on for about a month. No doubt, a brutal killer!

In any event, we arrived at the scene. The room was a mess, with glasses knocked over on the table - a real disaster area.

While greeting an acquaintance of the victim, Captain Neil noticed something.

“...The liquid in this glass is suspicious.”

With that, he tasted the small bit of liquid left... Huh?

“This is... poison!”

Bam! Just as he spoke, Captain Neil’s giant body toppled over. I see... a fatal poison! And a very fast-acting one!

“Captain!”

The acquaintance of the victim and various members including Vice-Captain Brett began to panic. Oh, what mayhem!

“What are you doing, sir?! This is what exactly we brought Iris along to prevent!”

Vice-Captain Brett yelled at the already-not-breathing Captain Neil. Well, but he would revive. I went ahead and explained that to the acquaintance.

Boy, Captain Neil is such a birdbrain!

[◇/○]

Vice-Captain Brett's hair has grown long. Well, it didn't grow that suddenly, but I did ask him about it.

"Vice-Captain Brett, why is your hair so long?"

It used to be at about shoulder level, but now it was down to around his hips. It was tied together behind him.

I have to say, having such graceful facial features, it really suits him! Oops, that's just my personal opinion.

"It's like a medal of honor. My hair not being cut shows that I haven't been attacked by an enemy. Swords would be sharp enough to cut it, you see."

So was it something like "it's shameful for a swordsman to be hit from behind"? Though Vice-Captain Brett wasn't a swordsman. But, hm, I see. I could feel the style.

I accepted it at the time, but thinking about it now, a few things occur to me.

First, it's very rare that an enemy will come near Vice-Captain Brett in battle. And in fact, those that do, he can drag down with his shadow abilities.

Oh yeah, and while I have long hair too, I was born with it. Does the growth rate of hair differ between dragons, too?

But it's fun having access to a variety of hair styles when your hair is long.

...I wonder if Vice-Captain Brett will try pigtails, a ponytail, or braids in the future?

[◇/□]

Today was... face training? Somehow, that doesn't sound right, but it was a peaceful day without any jobs, so I did that.

I, Iris, have the ability to analyze many things. As I wrote before. Did you remember?

Well, it was written in the first-generation notebook, which is ten notebooks earlier at this point, so I suppose anyone who started with this one might not know...

No, I'm assuming whatever involved party, or person from a separate universe, is looking at this notebook already knows, so I'll proceed with that assumption!

When I use my analyzing ability, I have a face like a cat scaring off prey!

Huh? You say that doesn't make sense? Well, I don't understand it either! It makes me angry, angry! Angryyyy!

A certain con artist pointed it out to me. What a terrible thing to say to a lady! Sheesh!

But when I told others, even members from the investigative unit, they said...

"Come to think of it..."

Which was an unsatisfactory result. So now I'm doing this.

I went up to the mirror and tried to make that face, but that's where things got tough.

See, when I'm using my ability, it takes considerable energy, so of course I'm putting more force in my face than I ever would normally.

And when I really did use my ability, I just analyzed the unremarkable mirror in front of me, and couldn't focus on what

kind of face I had at the time, so I wasn't able to use it.

I did try putting in an approximate amount of force too, but it just wouldn't work out.

Furthermore, it seems others saw me, and rumor began to spread for a while that "Captain Iris of the investigative unit was fighting herself in the mirror or something."

From now on, I believe I'll do it in the privacy of my own room.

[◇/×]

Today, I reunited with Efina while on the job! Though she was with that unpleasant con artist. Grrr.

She'd grown quite a bit taller - over a hundred centimeters now, perhaps? Can't wait to see what the future holds!

I got the impression that compared to the last time I met them, the trust between them had grown, and the distance between them had suddenly lessened.

It was Gold Town where we last met, wasn't it? That whole thing was quite an affair... Oh, it was really something! But it would get long, so I'll omit it.

The two of them seemed to be visiting town to gather various information again. When I asked the con artist if he'd given up on conning, his reply...

"Efi would starve the day I quit swindling."

I suppose there aren't many other avenues for lying than con artistry?

Just as I wondered to myself "why do con artists have to lie in the first place?"...

"Teo promised he wouldn't lie in front of me anymore. I never

could see through Teo's lies. But that's good, right?"

Efina showed an innocent smile. Then the con-man coughed.

"Don't call me that in front of others, dummy..."

He seemed to be using a fake name in this town, too.

After that, there was a bit of a dispute between Efina and the con artist, but I was relieved to see they were getting along well.

"No we aren't!"

They both denied me at the same time, but I could see right through them. Heehee.

...And that should be all the major events, I suppose. Whew, I'm glad I could write that down before I forgot.

Lately, the dragons in our care have been writing here too, so one notebook fills up very quickly. Such liberty!

Oh, I've got a call. Another job? I'll do my best today!

And if anything amusing happens, I'll be sure to write it!

slam

Afterword

It's not a lie. What I'm writing here in this afterword is no lie.

And so that was the novelization of LiEat. It's such a strange feeling that I would have novels for not one, but two of the games I created. When I asked "Everything, again?", the editor replied "Everything, please!" (paraphrased), so once again I provided both the writing and the artwork.

Now, about the title LiEat. It's a made-up word combining "lie" and "eat." It's pretty much a dad joke. There are elements of such dad jokes in my works here and there. Originally I wanted to make it a mystery sort of game, with a dragon who ate not lies but mysteries. But since I wanted that title, this is what it ended up settling on. Ultimately, it wasn't even a mystery game, but I addressed that regret in the third game.

I wrote the previous book Alice mare with the objective of including things not depicted in the game and cleanly wrapping things up. But LiEat was made using my reflections on Alice mare to wrap everything up within the games, and as a result, people told me it did wrap up nicely! So when there was talk of making a novel, I held my head, wondering, what do I write...?

Since I've been given so many pages, it wouldn't do to just repeat the same story again... I feared there would be no freshness for people who played the games. It's in my personality.

That got me to recall how I'd left out the events after Efi was just born from the games, so I concluded I would write a story around that part.

With a new story that had no game base, I hit a different wall. When I make a story, I come up with the start and the end and bluff

my way through the middle. So the wall I came up against was having to make everything clear in the initial plot I submitted.

By the way, this was the first time I met my editor in person, and there too I got a surprised reaction of “you bluff your way through?” Yes, exactly.

Therein also lies the reason why when asked if I’ll make a LiEat IV, I have to say it’s impossible. I had only thought up to that conclusion, so it’s not a matter of “won’t make,” but “can’t make.” I suspect if I made one, everyone’s characterization would fall apart.

That said, even in the novel, I kept getting names wrong and nearly messing up characterization a few times and going “Huh, is that not enough pages?”, but with the aid of my editor (actually, the editor remembered things better), through twists and turns, I’m now able to delight in writing a lively afterword.

LiEat was a series I made recklessly deciding to do everything but sound effects myself - I handled it all from the maps to the writing, even the music. I really do think “Is the dummy me?”, but I’m glad I could finish it.

To casually bring up a third topic, I’ve actually released another game titled 1bitHeart. This one contains some voice acting within the game with the aid of nearly fifty actors, and it’s the biggest game project I’ve done so far. If you like, I’d be glad if you played it too.

Again, I’d like to state my gratitude to all of you. If I ever get another chance like this, it will be thanks to you all. And it would make me very happy if you played the games that continue from this story. Thank you very much.

△○□× (Miwashiba)